

**Critical Practices and Strategies of Appropriation  
in the Work of Juan Carlos Romero [\*]****Fernando Davis**

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In Juan Carlos Romero's graphic work of the 1970s, the subject of violence tenses and actualizes a multiple critical mechanism, extending and reprocessing a set of strategies and practices of intervention activated by the artist in the course of the previous decade: the calling into question of the conceptual and technical referents of the canonical engraving, the exploration of alternative circuits beyond the institutional art spaces, the appropriation of images from the communications media, or the pursuit of greater participation on the part of the spectator. In a context characterized by increasing radicalization and political confrontation, whose turbulent signs light up the field of art, these problematics are plotted and re-inscribed in the accidents and folds in dissidence of a conceptual poetics.

**Segments, square and systems**

In November 1970, Romero took part in the first Certamen Nacional de Investigaciones Visuales with *4,000,000 m2 of the City of Buenos Aires*, a conceptual work made up of various graphic documents: a plan of the Salas Nacionales exhibition rooms, a map and eight photographs of the city of

Buenos Aires, and a text in which the proposal is characterized by the artist as a system composed of semi-fixed elements (streets and city blocks, buildings and trees) and movable elements (people, animals, water, light, telephone connections, radio, television, cars, incineration, trains, gas, etc).<sup>1</sup> The text also provides a series of precise data: geographical points in the city, and the dates and times on which Romero took each of the photographs on show.

On the floor of the exhibition room, the letters A, B, C and D identified the corners of a virtual square, designated 'generator' by the artist. A second square, of 'closure of the information', drawn on the plan of the institution, situated its four corners E, F, G and H at four points outside of the building, from which four of the photographs presented as part of the system had been taken. Romero thus inscribed his first 'generator' square within a larger square, this in turn inscribed inside a third square, designated 'of total closure' —with an area of 4,000,000 m<sup>2</sup>— marked on the map of the city of Buenos Aires with the letters I, J, K and L, the fixed locations from which the artist had taken a further sequence of photographs.

Of the various parts that comprise the system, Romero claims in the text, only the human subjects 'can be conscious' of it and reflect on the relationships between the units and parts that compose it and thus on their own belonging to the system structure, configuring 'the work in subjective form'.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect the documentary corpus of 4,000,000 m<sup>2</sup>... constitutes the point of departure from which the spectator initiates a reflexive *mental process* —along the way, demythologizing artistic creation—<sup>3</sup> with regard to the system's conditions of possibility. In the operation of articulating the different levels of information, the observer abandons his or her traditional contemplative attitude to address the work, actively participating in a double practice of cutting up and modifying the system's grid of relationships. 4,000,000 m<sup>2</sup>... thus champions 'an adaptation of the methods of reading that tend to be brought into play in apprehending the meanings in a visual artwork'.

<sup>4</sup> In mentally reconstructing the performance of the system and its constituent parts, the spectators become aware of their involvement in it and reflect on their own capacity to decode and to rearrange the set of data: their ability to dismantle, by means of intellectual practice, the relationships of power and the hierarchies that legitimate it and regulate its internal organization.

In February 1971, *4,000,000 m2...* was included in the exhibition *From Figuration Art to Systems Art in Argentina*, organized by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación de Buenos Aires (henceforth CAYC) at the Camden Arts Centre in London. <sup>5</sup> In July of that same year, again at the invitation of CAYC, Romero took part in the exhibition *Arte de Sistemas* at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires. In the catalogue text introducing the show, the term 'systems art' was put forward as a unifying category embracing a varied series of practices that, inscribed in the orbit of conceptualism, coincided in pointing to 'processes more than to finished products of "good art"', according to the definition offered by the director of CAYC, Jorge Glusberg. <sup>6</sup>

As his contribution to the show, Romero carried out a double intervention: in the first place, he presented a new sequence of annotated maps and photographs, mounted on twelve sections of card, together with a short text that—as in *4,000,000 m2...*— provides a series of references for decoding the work. *Segment of straight line A-B = 53,000 m* proposes the tracing of a virtual straight line that connects the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires with the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes in La Plata. <sup>7</sup> On the general map in the first section of the work, the straight line is segmented in ten equal parts measuring 5,300 metres each. This dimension is also projected onto two roads that join the cities of Buenos Aires and La Plata. At each of the points determined by the projection, Romero took two photographs, one in each direction. *Segment of straight line...* exhibits the successive records of this systematic double operation, as a proposal for an 'informative study of the context developed in the virtual straight line that connects the two cities'. <sup>8</sup> The photographic mechanism intervenes in the visual continuum, cutting off and

sectioning the distance covered by the eye, which can be reconstructed by the observer in an intellectual operation. However, the premise of the work inheres not in the simple reconstruction of an itinerary set by the artist, but in the possibility, explicitly stated in Romero's text, of the spectator then intervening in that itinerary, sectioning the straight line at any of its intermediate points, and reactivating the distance measured out with new resonances of meaning. It is interesting to note that while on the one hand the proposal inscribes its points of origin and closure in two art museums, on the other it invokes an experience that is situated outside of the art institution, in the itinerary between the two museums. The work superposes on the itinerary carefully documented in the series of maps and photos another itinerary that consists in incorporating the records of the social reality and appropriating their sign, to reinstall them in the context of the art institution.<sup>9</sup> In the practice of 'taking fragments of the real and signalling them, giving them the status of art', reality 'is no longer represented, but (some part of it) is shifted, to present it in a new context'.<sup>10</sup>

The second part of Romero's intervention in *Arte de Sistemas* is embodied in the exhibition catalogue itself. On the page spread allocated for his personal artist's profile<sup>11</sup> he reproduced a portion of the map of the province of Buenos Aires, on which he again drew the straight line of 53,000 m—starting point of his conceptual premise— and then projected it onto the sides of a square with an area of 7,200 km<sup>2</sup> and a length of side of 1,120 km, with its corners in Baradero, the Punta Indio Naval Air Base and, roughly, Tandil and Carlos Casares. In its mere articulation as a project the proposal—never realized— radicalized the requirements of a type of work that abandons the imperative of its material closure to present itself as a conceptual experience, actualized in each new intervention of the spectator.<sup>12</sup>

In October 1971, in the Galería Arte Nuevo in Buenos Aires, Romero presented the series *Undrawn Drawings*, a system of seven stencils in which the work as such was replaced by information about it. The whole exhibited texts and precise

data about the dimensions of each work, the technique, number in the series and place in the system. Each of the 'drawings' was thus identified in its condition as 'not drawn', in the mere summary enumeration of its formal qualities, in the tabulated exhibition of a series of verifiable data. Within the tautological loop, each work is turned back on its own conditions of possibility, commenting on and inscribing itself as an integral part of the graphic system as a whole. <sup>13</sup>

### **Swift appropriated**

In 1970, Romero transcribed on sixteen metres of paper four excerpts from *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, using as matrices the cut-out letters of the abstract stencils he had made a few years before. In these, the reiteration of a single letter, whose geometry is fragmented and dispersed in the orthogonal orders of the plane, configures by repetition a dynamic structure, an intricate visual mesh of kinetic resonances. Voided of its meaning as an element of language, the letter is recovered in its condition as abstract visual form and minimum unit of the serial structure.

In 1969, a stencil from this series, entitled *V*, won a prize at the second *Salón Swift de Grabado*, an etchings competition sponsored by the Buenos Aires-based fridge manufacturer Swift and presented at the MAM. <sup>14</sup> The following year Swift invited Romero to take part in the third annual print event and compete, together with the other five prize-winners from the previous two years, for the special Hugo Parpagnoli Prize, in memory of the former director of the MAM. Although a relative newcomer on the art scene, the Swift in 1970 was outstanding for its reception and institutional validation of the most ground-breaking developments in printmaking of the last few years: early objects, cut-out works, surprising xerographs and optical-kinetic structures, among other proposals, were shown at the competition in successive years.

*Swift in Swift*, the title of Romero's submission, proposed a radical inversion of the 'natural' conditions of production and reception of the traditional engraving. The sixteen

metres of paper with texts from *Gulliver's Travels* were laid out on the floor of the room in four sections, grouped to form two facing Ls, according to the artist's indications, obliging the spectator to bend down to 'read' the work. It is possible to think of *Swift in Swift* as being in continuity with Romero's previous graphic production, as a derivation from or consequence of his experiments of the 1960s. But though it potentiated the developments of its day—questioning the traditional confining of the print to the two-dimensional support, and the geometric register of the letter explored in his abstract engravings—the mesh of problems raised by the project presented in the MAM was new: a kind of 'hinge' work, poised between Romero's kinetic investigations of the 60s and his political graphic output of the 70s, but still using formal and technical resources already present in his earlier work, *Swift in Swift* set itself apart from optical-geometric concerns to introduce a conceptual problematic.

The competition jury, made up of the artist Fernando López Anaya, the art critic Fermín Fèvre and the then director of the MAM, Roberto Del Villano, awarded the Hugo Parpagnoli Prize to Romero, considering that the artist had 'developed an important original approach in introducing into printmaking the current problematic of contemporary art.'<sup>15</sup> However, the cluster of meanings projected by *Swift in Swift* overflowed the single 'aesthetic problematic' that, in the opinion of the jury, inscribed Romero's proposal within the latest developments in so-called 'experimental printmaking'. The high degree of critical density of the work went beyond the mere calling into question of the limits of the traditional print and on into the dual operation of decontextualization and reframing, of extraction and resemanticizing of an 'appropriated' fragment of text.

Described by the artist as a 'situational print',<sup>16</sup> *Swift in Swift* proposes a reading of the texts of *Gulliver's Travels*, articulated in their horizontal location on the floor of the room. However, this reading appears to be deferred, given the proximity of the characters, which are very close to one another. The appropriated text is presented, in this sense, as 'hidden'. Its decoding requires, in Romero's words, the

'penetration of the spectator into the work', the modification of the 'aesthetic message' –in which the texts are perceived as 'linear conduits'– into a semantic message.<sup>17</sup> In his account of the exhibition, the critic Horacio Safons observed that the artist's proposal 'acts at a certain distance with a geometric character (horizontal bars, vertical bars, ambiguous figures are visualized). Close to, it defines its meaning, it is hypersemanticized. The visitor is prompted to decipher a text.'<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of cut-outs between the words, 'on a different level from the line of phrases, doses the reading, mobilizes the eye, sharpens the attention. The spectator ceases to be a spectator. He participates. He has to decipher, to obtain the visual synthesis between the conceptual (phrase) and the visual (sequence, punctuation, colour).'<sup>19</sup>

*Swift in Swift* thus violates the traditional conditions of aesthetic reception by forcing the spectator to adopt a participative role in its interpretation. The reading is energized, contracted and distended, it is tensed in the visual condensation of the graphic signs, in the apparent 'neutrality' of the geometry and in the attentive, interrupted, deferred observation that 'unmasks' the text-image. The title of the work, in its tautological closure, provides the key to its interpretation: if on a first level *Swift in Swift* seems to be a simple pun that transmits to the inscription of the texts by the author of *Gulliver's Travels* in the Salón Swift de Grabado; on a second reading, the Romero work seeks to activate a critical gaze, by resituating fragments of the novel –which refer to war and exploitation– in a context that overflows the institutional framework of the Salon: the recent conflicts between the sponsoring company and its workers. In the relative 'concealment' of the text, *Swift in Swift* thus proposes a critical operation intended to 'expose' the existence of that conflict, introducing it into the closed and supposedly 'autonomous' realm of the art institution.<sup>20</sup>

**Representations of violence: appropriation and critical re-inscriptions**

In April 1973, Romero occupied the headquarters of CAYC with an installation entitled *Violence*. He covered the walls and floor of the main exhibition room with posters printed with that one word, in large letters;<sup>21</sup> in a second space he brought together fragments of texts by various authors, proposed as partial definitions of the term; finally, in a third sector of the installation, he displayed front covers of the sensationalist magazine *Así*, with photographs of the police repression in Córdoba and Rosario, among other images, and the word 'violence', reiterated in bold headlines.<sup>22</sup>

The appropriation and resignification of images and texts from the graphic communications media and various literary sources characterizes a form of critical intervention the artist had already explored in previous works. In 1966 he took part in the collective show *The Visual Artists' Homage to Viet-Nam*,<sup>23</sup> with a cut-out collage based on a press photograph showing a Vietnamese prisoner being beaten by an American soldier, accompanied by the caption: 'The anger of the "ranger" is vented on the Vietcong prisoner'. Ironically entitled *American way of life*, the Romero collage contrasts the crude image of violence in its media circulation with the geometric rhythms and subtle variations of light and shade of the folds of the cut paper, and thus confronts the quote from modernism and its supposed formal autonomy, with the 'hot' recording of immediate actuality.

In 1973 Romero extended the marks of violence in the complex corpus of texts and images brought together in the installation at CAYC, configuring a dense intertextual mesh, a multiple structure of crossed references whose nodes and intersections are displaced and relocated in the mobility of the 'actor-spectator' —a term used by the artist to designate the potential recipient of his proposal—<sup>24</sup> and in the observer's practice of articulating the different levels of information of the work-system, actively traversing and interrogating its strata of opacity, relocating meaning in its plural fabric. *Violence* designs its strategies of appeal in the de-centring of the traditional places of artist and public in the aesthetic experience. The assemblage configures its interlocutory practices in the empowerment of

the multiple cluster of voices and images, where the artist 'is simultaneously negated and constituted in the act of quotation'.<sup>25</sup> Since 'the different sources and authors cited as "texts" are left intact and are thus fully recognizable, the spectator is confronted with a decentralized text that is completed by its reading and the comparison of the original meaning with the subsequent semantic layers that the text/image has acquired.'<sup>26</sup>

The CAYC handout accompanying the show included a short text by the Italian art critic Gillo Dorfles: 'One of the crucial points that fundamentally differentiate Latin American conceptual art from European and American conceptual art is its ideological content [...] different media and changing articulations running through the most heterodox semiotic systems, but always with a specific intention of offering the spectator a direct and effective image of his determination to denounce the social injustices of his country, and to fight against the economic-political difficulties in which almost all the countries of Latin America are immersed.'<sup>27</sup> The text by this critic, whose interpretive approach met with an enthusiastic reception on the early 70s scene—in contrast to the firm refusal by the artists of the first conceptualism of the previous decade to recognize his work in the category of conceptual art—<sup>28</sup> provided, by its inclusion in the handout for the show, a precise semantic anchorage for the interpretation of Romero's work.<sup>29</sup> In the same line, Jorge Glusberg wrote in the catalogue that 'Romero's model is a redefinition, a questioning of the role of the Latin American artist in his social context.'<sup>30</sup> Romero, for his own part, referred to his work as 'art of ideological consciousness-raising.'<sup>31</sup>

*Violence* actualizes a critical schema that Romero had elaborated in a series of earlier works. In September 1972, on the occasion of his participation in the show *Art and Ideology. CAYC in the open air*, in the Plaza Roberto Arlt, he prepared a short text for the catalogue that can be interpreted as a synthetic programme summarizing the lines of intervention that *Violence* extends and convolutes: 'My conceptual proposals are oriented toward the participation of the spectator-actor in issues related to the national

reality, and therefore involves the verifying of the objective process that takes facts or situations of our country. But here is also a process that is not so easy to confirm at times, and it is that of violence. I want to warn here those who can contribute something with which to verify this situation that at times it is so subtle as to become invisible. Violence must be applied in our proposals, as one of the many forms of reducing repressive violence.' <sup>32</sup>

In August of that same year, invited to take part in the third Sal6n Premio Artistas con Acrilicopaolini competition in the Museo de Arte Moderno, he presented a diptych in which the word 'violence' appears multiplied in the serial schema of twenty-eight black and white plates of moulded acrylic –the use of this material was a condition for taking part– alongside a fragment from the *Notebooks* of Leonardo da Vinci and a series of pages from a notebook on which was written, in capital letters and in red ink, a description of the conceptual basis of Romero's proposal. The text by Leonardo was also distributed as a flyer during the course of the exhibition. <sup>33</sup> Romero printed it on both sides of the paper: on one side, in black on a white background and on the other, like a negative, in white on a black background. In the double operation in which the artist made the fragment of found text his own, snatching it from its original framework to locate it in a new semantic context of references and associations –a practice widely extended in *Violence*– the disruptive potential of the work is tensed. Described by Romero as 'valid for a strategy of violence,' <sup>34</sup> the short text handed out to the visitors to the show was proposed as a mechanism capable of activating a critical reflection, in order to 'reclaim violence for the oppressed.' <sup>35</sup> In this way the appropriationist strategy displaces the reading, de-centres the source-meaning of the 'confiscated' document and re-inscribes its meaning in the scenario of acute socio-political conflict of the early 70s. In the set of manuscripts mounted on the wall next to the acrylic diptych, Romero distinguished between a 'repressive' and a 'liberating' violence, <sup>36</sup> as dialectical opposites that are tensed in the dynamics of the social. Far from identifying violence in a strictly negative sense, the

artist sees it as 'an act that generates life'.<sup>37</sup> In its critical stance, the double text was presented as a synthetic platform on which to move from reflexive practice to action. The spectator-actors,' the artist wrote, 'penetrate inside the text and assume an attitude with which to complete the work,' which is 'not completed in any way if the spectator does not act.'<sup>38</sup>

The following year, the CAYC installation reactivated and potentiated this demand, in the obsessive exhibition of the marks of violence in its multiple and complex manifestations. In the catalogue we read: 'violence is everywhere, omnipresent and multifarious: brutal, open, subtle, insidious, dissimulated, rationalized, scientific, condensed, solidified, consolidated, anonymous, abstract, irresponsible.'<sup>39</sup>

### **A poetics of urgency**

In the June and July of 1972, CAYC presented *Toward a Profile of Latin American art*, a show by the Grupo de los Trece and various special guests that was shown simultaneously at the Encuentro Internacional de Arte de Pamplona in Spain and the Instituto de Arte Contemporáneo de Lima in Peru.<sup>40</sup> In his presentation text, Glusberg situated the reading around the 'profile' of conceptual practices in Latin America in the 'specific problematic' shared by those countries, 'in consequence of their revolutionary situation'.<sup>41</sup> Romero exhibited a series of heliographic prints—a procedure used in all of the works in the show—entitled *On the national reality 12. The lunfardo language of Argentine*, in which he used terms in *lunfardo*, the underworld slang of Buenos Aires, to refer to the police repression.<sup>42</sup>

Within the framework of the CAYC exhibition, Pazos and Romero put on a discussion on the subject of 'Art as consciousness in Argentina'.<sup>43</sup> In the CAYC handout it was argued that 'In the Argentina of 1972, to define art as the BECOMING CONSCIOUS OF THE PRESENT is to give it a strong ethical and even political content [...] to become conscious of our reality is to reflect on dependence, underdevelopment

and violence. And all reflection leads, inevitably, to action [...] It is here that art and the artist take on significance: every work, gesture or word pronounced by an Argentine artist must tend to arouse and clarify the consciousness of other Argentines with respect to their own reality.' <sup>44</sup>

Identified by the critics as the 'political fraction' of the Grupo de los Trece, <sup>45</sup> Pazos and Romero went on to refer to conceptualism in terms of 'a border art, still far from definitive', but capable nonetheless of being used as an 'appropriate instrument or action with which to invert the cultural political process in relation to the national reality.' <sup>46</sup> In such a case, 'the extreme consequence to which they tend, like other conceptualists, but with a different intention,' as Hugo Monzón noted in his review, 'is to de-hierarchize and even dispense with the artistic medium or object, establishing direct educational contact between the artist and the public.' <sup>47</sup>

In other words, far from confining itself to the fringes of an intellectual operation or mental process, the conceptual proposal is conceived as a potential platform of intervention from which to activate a critical consciousness with regard to the political and social contingencies of the particular context. The vanguard does not find approval in the rhythms and transitions of an internal logic, but tenses its practice in a reality that extends beyond the limits of the art institution, conflicting the space of art with the urgencies of politics. Violence is referred 'in so much forceful repressive triggering, war, massacre, imprisonment and torture [...] in all its historical-political embodiment.'

<sup>48</sup> In the incorporation of the signs in turbulence of its immediate reality, art traces and multiplies the marks of urgency.

Between August and December 1973, Romero took part, with other artists, <sup>49</sup> in a series of interventions—successively displayed in the framework of the fourth *Salón Premio Artistas con Acrilicopaolini*, held at the MAM, in the Law Faculty of the UBA and in the Galería Arte Nuevo—whose schema actualizes two episodes of immediate political history: the massacres at Trelew and Ezeiza. <sup>50</sup> The following

year he produced *On the national reality (to comrade Mujica, murdered 11-5-74)*, with photographs taken from the graphic media and subsequently intervened on, a tribute to the liberation-theology priest murdered by the Triple A. The series of *Cries*, also begun at this time, extended the image of urgency in the selection of newspaper and magazine photographs, with violence taking the form of 'faces convulsed by pain, indignation, war, sporting celebrations, street demonstrations, bombings, prison, the death'.<sup>51</sup> In some cases, the inclusion of literary quotes or words and phrases taken from press headline resemanticizes the image, broadening its meaning. In reworking the appropriationist strategy of the 1973 installation, the 'cries' seem to empower their stance in the extension of the conflicting marks of the multiple representations of violence, in the reactivation of their plural fabric of critical destitutes and reassignments of meaning.<sup>52</sup>

In *The Diabolical Games* and *The Emergent*, from 1976, Romero replaces the image of urgency in his photographic record of the games of a group of children (his own two children and a nephew). In the first, the kids are portrayed at play dragging each other through the grass; in the second, coming out of the river at Hudson Beach. But if both works displace the critical marks by invoking, from the horizon of meaning established by the set of photographs, the conserved experience of childhood, the semantic anchorage provided by the titles introduces, in its lack of correspondence with the series of images, a disturbing distance that upsets their reading, excluding the photographs from their potential place in the family photo album, to reinstall the record of violence in the disturbing connotations and the flight lines of new resonances and folds of signification. Image and text are reciprocally tensed and mobilized in a double play of bindings and loosings, of adjustments and disarmings of meaning. *The Diabolical Games* and *The Emergent* thus seem to call for a spectator capable of entering into 'complicity' with each work, actively addressing their strata of opacity. In contrast with other projects by the artist in which violence is referred to directly, undisguisedly, in these works Romero uses subtle maskings of

the signified, increasing the distance between image and title in order to activate reflection in the spectator, returning to violence by way of a carefully fashioned metaphor: the reiterated image of bodies being dragged or coming out of the river, as a disturbing sign of other bodies and other violences.<sup>53</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Romero, Juan Carlos. Untitled, mimeograph, 1970s. The artist's own archive.

2. Ibid. That same year the problematic of the work as 'system' was addressed by the Centro de Experimentación Visual de La Plata, a group of which Romero was initially a member, alongside Mario Casas, Raúl Mazzoni, Jorge Pereira and Roberto Rollié. In April 1970, in the catalogue of the CEV's first exhibition in the Galería Carmen Waugh, the group proposed a synthetic programme of action intended to 'demythologize the creative process and consider the reception as fundamental; that is to say, to create the possibilities for the recipient to participate, break the silence and eliminate the distance that exists between him and the visual message. We understand on the basis of this that the individual realization will only be possible in so far as the product of our activity is integrated into the life of society.' (Author unknown. Centro de Experimentación Visual, *Sistemas*, exhib. cat., Buenos Aires, Galería Carmen Waugh, 1970s).

3. Author unknown. '4.000.000 m2 de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires', *Fotovisión*, año 1, n.º. 1,, Buenos Aires, April 1971. The same article notes that the person 'until now known as the spectator' is to become 'creator of the process of the work of art, according to his needs and possibilities of interpretation.'

4. Author unknown. 'Investigaciones Visuales', *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 21 November 1970.

5. In its choice of proposals by twenty-five artists, the selection presented by CAYC in London sought to extend the premises outlined by Jorge Glusberg in August 1970 with the official presentation of the new 'systems art' in the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes 'Emilio A. Caraffa' in Córdoba.

In fact, the London exhibition replicated the name of the Córdoba show of the year before – *De la Figuración al Arte de Sistemas*– which had featured objects and graphic and photographic documentation by Luis Fernando Bedit, Nicolás García Urriburu and Edgardo Antonio Vigo. In addition to a wider selection of artists, the Camden show included a section devoted to computer graphics under the rubric 'Art and Cybernetics'.

6. Glusberg, Jorge. 'Introducción a Arte de Sistemas', *Arte de Sistemas*, exhib. cat., Buenos Aires, Centro de Arte y Comunicación and Museo de Arte Moderno, 1971. However, apart from certain common developments in local practices and the poetics of the international scene, centred on the displacement of the traditional materiality of the artwork and the potentiation of its projectual dimension, one press notice identified the 'Latin American avant-garde' as characterized by the presence of a 'strongly politicized art with a clear call to drastic changes', in contrast to the premises of conceptualism in the United States and Europe (Author unknown. 'Arte de Sistemas', *El Día*, Sunday supplement, La Plata, Sunday 15 August 1971).

7. In the Museo Provincial, Romero had taken part that same year in the show *Arte Joven Platense*, which opened on the 2nd of July and closed a few days before the opening of the CAYC exhibition in the MAM.

8. Glusberg, Jorge. *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 1978, p. 141.

9. This problematic is also present in his series *De la realidad nacional*, produced during these years, also with photographs.

10. Longoni, Ana. 'El arte, cuando la violencia tomó la calle. Apuntes para una estética de la violencia' in 'Poderes de la imagen'. *I Congreso Internacional de Teoría e Historia de las Artes. IX Jornadas del CAIA*, Buenos Aires, CAIA, 2001 [2001].

11. CAYC had assigned each artist page space for an individual profile, printed as a standard grid, in which they could include an image of their choice, together with the data of their work on show in *Arte de Sistemas* and a brief biography.

12. 7.200 km<sup>2</sup> can also be interpreted as an invitation to extend this meditative practice to the hypothetical projection of the sides of the virtual square, beyond the limits proposed by the artist.

13. For example, on one of the works Romero wrote: 'This unit is integrated into itself and into the system.' In January 1972, Romero contribution to the Segunda Bienal de San Juan del Grabado Latinoamericano, entitled *Para un sistema gráfico I, II y III* (1971), returns to the problems addressed in the *Dibujos no dibujados* (Undrawn Drawings).

14. Two other geometric works by the artist won prizes in these years: in 1968 *M(undo)* was awarded 3rd Prize at the Festival de las Artes de Tandil, organized by the Office of Culture of the province of Buenos Aires, and in 1969 *O* won the Gran Premio de Honor in the Prints section at the LVIII Salón Nacional de Artes Plásticas.

15. *Tercer Salón Swift de Grabado*, exhib. cat., Buenos Aires, Museo de Arte Moderno, 1970.

16. Romero, Juan Carlos. Untitled, mimeograph, no date. The artist's own archive.

17. Ibid.

18. Safons, Horacio. 'Entre premios y cornadas', *Primera Plana*, no. 399, Buenos Aires, 22 September 1970.

19. Ibid.

20. The critical potential of the proposal seemed assured, in principle, in that the work, presented by invitation for a special prize, could not be rejected. As it was also, in the artist's own words, an 'uncomfortable' work, 'not suitable for a prize', *Swift en Swift* sought to escape its hypothetical institutional consecration while at the same time projecting its polemic in one of the principal spaces of legitimation of the avant-garde visual arts of the day – the MAM – within the framework of a competition – the Salón Swift de Grabado – sponsored by the very company whose activities the work questioned. However, the prize awarded to *Swift en Swift* served, in Romero's opinion, to neutralize its critical density, effectively frozen in the exclusively 'aesthetic' legitimation of the work, isolated from the social and political conditions of its production and reception.

21. Romero here employed a printing process widely used in the production of posters advertising popular dances.

22. 'Violence explodes in Rosario', 'Violence after Mass', 'And what is this, if it isn't violence?' and 'Córdoba. The violent strike', among others.

23. Characterized as a 'show-cum-demonstration' (Longoni, Ana. 'El deshabitador. Ricardo Carreira en los inicios del conceptualismo', in: Viviana Usubiaga and Ana Longoni. *Arte y literatura en la Argentina del siglo XX*, Buenos Aires, Fundación Espigas, 2006, p. 79), *Homenaje al Viet-Nam de los Artistas Plásticos* was presented in the Van Riel gallery from the 25th of April to the 8th of May 1966, with the participation of some two hundred artists, in repudiation to the US escalation of the war. Among the works in the show was Ricardo Carreira's *Mancha de sangre*, an early contribution to 'the politicization of the conceptual premise and the precise articulation between concept and context'. (Ibid., p. 79).

24. In an interview on the occasion of his CAYC shows, Romero declared: 'What I want is the emergence of the spectator-actor, the spectator that engages in the artwork as if he were a part of it'. (Author unknown. 'Una estética de la sociedad que sufrimos. Violencia Show', *Así*, año XIX, no. 882, Buenos Aires, 1 May 1973). This problematic is also explicitly addressed in the texts accompanying his first conceptual works of 1970-71, discussed in this essay: *4.000.000 m2 de la ciudad de Buenos Aires* and *Segmento de recta A-B = 53.000 mts.*

25. Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. 'Procedimientos alegóricos: apropiación y montaje en el arte contemporáneo', en: *Formalismo e historicidad. Modelos y métodos en el arte del siglo XX*, Madrid, Akal, 2004, p. 103 [1997].

26. Ibid.

27. Dorfles, Gillo. Untitled, Buenos Aires, CAYC, GT-216, 11-4-73.

28. Specifically, León Ferrari and Juan Pablo Renzi. On this point, see Longoni, Ana and Mariano Mestman. *Del Di Tella a 'Tucumán Arde'. Vanguardia artística y política en el '68 argentino*, Buenos Aires, El Cielo por Asalto, 2000, pp. 230-232.

29. This was not the first time that Dorfles had noted this orientation. In 1972, on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition *Arte de Sistemas*, organized by CAYC at the Tercera Bienal de Arte Coltejer (Medellín, Colombia), at which the Italian critic was a jury member, he referred to the works of the Argentine group as documents 'of political denunciation' (Dorfles, Gillo. Untitled, *Tercera Bienal de Arte Coltejer*, exhib. cat., Medellín, 1972). At the same time, Jorge Glusberg, director of CAYC, also referred to this critical orientation in his brief introduction to the show in the catalogue: 'What is exhibited are not isolated static data, reflections of a social structure or the mere personality of an artist, but total facts whose objective signification stems from that dialectical unity of the individual and society that is made explicit through the history and embraces the revolutionary potential that foretells the coming of radical social changes. An integral part of this international show is also to make known the present-day problematic of Latin American art.' (Glusberg, Jorge. 'Arte de Sistemas', *Ibid.*). Invited by CAYC, Romero took part in the Medellín biennial with *Segmento de recta A-B = 53.000 mt.*, *De la realidad nacional 7* y *De la realidad nacional 9*. A couple of years later the Spanish aesthetician Simón Marchán Fiz coined the category of 'ideological conceptualism' in the enlarged 1974 edition of his book *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* (Madrid, Akal, 1997 [1972/1974]). For a discussion, see my essay 'Cuerpo y violencia en la obra de Juan Carlos Romero. Dispositivos críticos y estrategias de apropiación' in: *IV Jornadas de Investigación en Arte y Arquitectura en Argentina*, La Plata, Instituto de Historia del Arte Argentino y Americano - Facultad de Bellas Artes, Instituto de Estudios de Hábitat - Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, UNLP, 2006 [CD-ROM].

30. Glusberg, Jorge. Untitled, *Violencia*, exhib. cat., Buenos Aires, CAYC, 1973. Glusberg speaks of the 'artist-researcher', a category that makes extensive to the Grupo de los Trece, a group formed in late 1971, at the instigation of the CAYC director himself, and of which Romero was a member: 'One of the characteristics of the artists that form the Grupo de los Trece is the incorporation of the social;

working with an international language, they aim to sketch out the specific reality of the countries of the Third World' (Ibid.). In addition to Glusberg and Romero, the group also included Jacques Bedel, Luis Fernando Bénédict, Gregorio Dujovny, Carlos Ginzburg, Víctor Grippo, Jorge González Mir, Vicente Marotta, Luis Pazos, Alfredo Portillos, July Teich and Horacio Zabala.

31. Author unknown. 'Una estética...', op. cit.

32. Romero, Juan Carlos. Untitled, *Arte e ideología. CAYC al aire libre*, exhib. cat., Buenos Aires, CAYC, 1972. In the same catalogue, Pazos referred to violence as one of the characteristics of an art of the people (Pazos, Luis. 'Hacia un arte del pueblo', Ibid.).

33. A fragment of the text is also cited in the catalogue, in the space reserved for the name of the work: 'Violence is composed of four things: weight, force, movement and blow...' (*Tercer Salón Premio Artistas con Acrilicopaolini*, exhib. cat., Buenos Aires, Museo de Arte Moderno, 1972). In 1973 the text was used as part of the installation in CAYC and was again circulated as a flyer in the magazine *Hexágono '71*, edited by Edgardo Antonio Vigo (*Hexágono '71*, CD, La Plata, 1973).

34. Romero, Juan Carlos. 'Violencia', mimeograph, 1972. The artist's own archive.

35. Romero, Juan Carlos. 'Espectador-actor. Su participación', mimeograph, 1972. The artist's own archive.

36. Romero, Juan Carlos. 'Conclusión', mimeograph, 1972. The artist's own archive.

37. Author unknown. 'Una estética...', op. cit.

38. Romero, Juan Carlos. 'Espectador-actor...', op. cit. On one of the sheets on the wall, Romero noted several possible forms of intervention in the flyer-manifiesto: 'a) Tear up the printed sheet, c) Give it to someone else for them to act on, d) Stick it on a wall, e) Set fire to it for violent purposes, f) Start to apply the proposals, g) Imagine other uses, h) Try to ensure that other uses will always be violent' (Ibid.).

39. *Violencia*, cat. cit.

40. All of the works on show were on heliographic paper, in accordance with IRAM (Instituto Argentino de Racionalización

de Materiales) standards 4504 and 4508 –‘an economical and easily reproducible system’, the choice of which, Glusberg explained, ‘is not the product of chance, but inherent in the economic impossibilities not yet at our disposal.’ (Glusberg, Jorge. ‘Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano. Presentación del Grupo de los Trece y sus invitados’, Buenos Aires, CAYC, GT-133, 8-6-72)– making it possible to multiply each of the projects and exhibit them simultaneously in different places. *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano* was also presented that year at the Tercera Bienal de Arte Coltejer (Medellín, Colombia) and the Salón de la Independencia (Quito, Ecuador). At CAYC, the show ran from the 22nd of June to the 28th of July.

41. Glusberg, ‘Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano...’, op. cit. These considerations are reiterated in the catalogue for the exhibition in Pamplona (‘Presentación de la muestra’, *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano*, exhib. cat., CAYC, 1972) and on the heliographic sheet that Glusberg exhibited as a member of the Grupo de los Trece.

42. He also used this stratagem in the globe he presented in September of that same year in the CAYC show in Plaza Roberto Arlt.

43. The discussion was staged in two parts, on June 30th and July 7th.

44. Author unknown. ‘El arte como conciencia en la Argentina’, Buenos Aires, CAYC, GT-138, 22-6-72. The emphatic capitals are in the original. The text goes on to say: ‘For Argentine artists, all of this means achieving a high degree of self-awareness, creating on the basis of their own cultural context, reaching the greatest possible number of people, turning their backs on the propositions of the dominant cultures and not being afraid to express the violence that, in themselves, the concepts of consciousness and freedom contain’ (Ibid.). These words were taken up by the critic Horacio Safons in his review of the show (H.S. ‘Sobre panoramas y perfiles’, *Primera Plana*, no. 494, Buenos Aires, 18 of July of 1972).

45. Monzón, Hugo. ‘Dos muestras de arte conceptual exhiben divergentes propuestas’, *La Opinión*, Buenos Aires, 19 July 1972.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid. In his intervention in the show, Pazos exhibited, among other works, *Proyecto de monumento al prisionero político desaparecido*. In a short text in the catalogue, the artist presented 'Cinco proposiciones para un arte latinoamericano'. The first of these he claimed: 'To make art the becoming conscious of the present (Pazos, Luis. 'Cinco proposiciones para un arte latinoamericano', *Hacia un perfil...*, cat. cit.). The following year, in an interview on the occasion of his CAYC installation, Romero referred to *Violencia* in these terms: 'This is not an art to be sold. It is an art of ideological consciousness-raising' (Author unknown. 'Una estética...', op. cit.).

48. Longoni, Ana. 'Vanguardia y revolución. Ideas y prácticas artístico-políticas en la Argentina de los sesenta y setenta', in: Pablo Oyarzún, Nelly Richard and Claudia Zaldívar (eds.), *Arte y política*, Santiago de Chile, Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes, 2005, p. 135.

49. Perla Benveniste, Eduardo Leonetti, Pazos, Edgardo Antonio Vigo and, in the last presentation, Horacio Zabala.

50. For a development of this, see Giunta, Andrea: 'Destrucción-creación en la vanguardia argentina del sesenta: entre *Arte Destructivo* y "Ezeiza es Trelew"', in: Arturo Pascual Soto (ed.) *Arte y violencia*, México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas-UNAM, 1995, an Longoni, op. cit., 2001.

51. Longoni, Ana. 'Todos los gritos, el grito', *Juan Carlos Romero. Gritos*, cat. exp., Buenos Aires, Arcimboldo Galería de Arte, 2002. The first of these 'cries', intervened on with the inscription 'free or dead', is reproduced in the work referred to, a tribute to the priest Carlos Mujica. Romero returned to the same image the following year in the publication *Conciencia del arte*, which he edited with Eduardo Leonetti (Leonetti, Eduardo and Juan Carlos Romero. *Conciencia del arte*, Buenos Aires, Arte y Política, 1975), and again in 1976, in the silk-screen prints of the series *Violence*, presented at the 10th International Biennial Exhibition of Prints in Tokyo.

52. Working to a commission from the UNLP university in 2000, Romero, with Paloma Catalá del Río and Álvaro Jiménez,

produced a digital mural in homage to the missing, in which the image of the cry unequivocally evokes the horrors of the last military dictatorship.

53. I am indebted to Ana Longoni for drawing my attention to this idea.

This text correspond to the presentation that took place at the Barcelona Workshop in May, 2007.

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