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Identity politics, untold stories and creative actions: *Mundo LatinX* at Fashion Space Gallery

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The gender-neutral neologism 'LatinX' gained popularity since the early 2000s, and is currently used, in lieu of 'Latino' or 'Latina', by advocacy groups and activists to refer to the Latin American cultural, gender and racial identity, beyond any binarism and racial stereotype.

This diversity and inclusivity is precisely the main focus of the exhibition *Mundo LatinX* (Fashion Space Gallery, London, 8 February–4 April 2019), which displays the work of seventeen contemporary artists, designers and activists addressing questions about identity politics and representations of Latin Americans within a variegated and ever-evolving political, social and cultural context. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall poignantly explains that essentialist conceptions of national identity tend to rely on the idea of cultural identity as 'an unfolding essence, moving apparently without change, from past to future' ([1993] 2005: 38).

This compelling show, curated by White Line Projects (Fiona McKay and Xenia Capacete Caballero), critically questions the presumed homogeneity of a Latin American identity, that is, the colonial stereotype of a 'Latino culture', by unfolding

untold stories and giving voice to under-represented communities, such as LGBTQI+, diasporic and indigenous communities, human rights activists.

The works presented in the show come from a variety of disciplines and mediums, such as films, photography, illustration, comic books, textile and fashion design, interactive displays of Instagram feeds. The contributions on display are windows on often ignored stories and facets of LatinX-ness, such as: the Mexican American diaspora and the Chicano community portrayed by John M. Valádez and *Veteranas & Rucas*; the lives of indigenous transgender women working in Colombia's coffee region, documented by Lena Nucha's; the youth culture in the slums of Panama City, photographed by José Castrellón; the Latin American diasporic communities based in London, captured by Jahel Guerra and Silvia Röthlisberger; Mexican heritage and the indigenous artisan communities involved in Carla Fernández's fashion label; the reaction against Eurocentric beauty standards enacted by modelling agency *Guerxs* (Mexico City) and Brazilian creative collective *Brecho Replay*, both platforms for a more inclusive notion of beauty and LatinX identity; the multi-layered and composite nature of the Brazilian identity explored by artist and activist Sabrina Collares; biopolitics, gender and activism as explored by Peruvian fashion designer and scholar Lucía Cuba.

In the show, there are neither classifications in terms of theme or nationality, nor chronologies, with the curatorial approach rather listening to the plurality of these voices and creating opportunities for interesting juxtapositions between the different contributions. Moreover, a rich programme of events, such as workshops, artist talks and panel discussions, integrates the exhibition, activating a precious space for debating and involving the wider community. In this way, *Mundo LatinX* and the series of events framing the show effectively manage to disclose a much-needed opportunity to reflect on the complexities of cultural identity, and remind us of the present political landscape,

one that perpetuates border enforcement and the discrimination of marginal communities. Especially nowadays that the myth of cultural and national continuity permeates the political debate, contributions such as *Mundo LatinX* are incredibly relevant, as they help address the multi-layered, prismatic nature of cultural identity, demonstrating that the presumed continuity is nothing but a ‘retrospective illusion’ (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988: 89).

Reflecting on the dialogic nature of the show and the importance of the debates addressed by the series of events, I have engaged in some brief conversations with White Line Projects, discussing their curatorial approach, and with artists Sabrina Collares and Lucía Cuba. These two interviews are an opportunity to reflect with the artists on crucial themes that are at the centre of their activity.

Brazilian-born Sabrina Collares is a London-based artist and activist working with a variety of mediums, such as collage, painting, sculpture, etc., and exploring the complexities of identity formation and the legacy of colonialism within visual language. In particular, her *Crisi de Identidade* (2018) and *A exótica* (2017), both part of *Mundo LatinX*, focus on identity and heritage and on the decolonization of traditional Eurocentric narratives.

Lucía Cuba, born in Peru, is a researcher, designer and scholar living in New York and Lima. She works at the intersection of fashion design and social science, focusing on issues of gender, health, biopolitics, activism and education. Within her activity, fashion/wearable forms become powerful performative and critical devices. Her series *Artículo 6*, included in *Mundo LatinX*, exposes the traumatic story of indigenous women being forcefully sterilized in recent Peruvian history.

In dialogue with White Line Projects

FL: Can you tell me how the exhibition *Mundo LatinX* originated?

White Line Projects (WLP): We both have a shared interest in postcolonial issues in terms of representation and identity. Fiona had spent time in Central America and Xenia had a long-term interest in Latin America. When we were approached by the Fashion Space Gallery to submit a proposal, it seemed like an appropriate time to explore this area, particularly if we consider the US political climate, in continual alienation and marginalization of Latin Americans. We also felt that the stories that came from this would be universal, exemplifying the legacy of colonialism in the modern world.

We spent the best part of a year developing the exhibition in terms of research, sourcing artworks and writing, as well as working with a graphic designer (who is from Brazil) and the gallery on the exhibition design, before it opened at the start of February 2019.

FL: The exhibition highlights important themes as postcolonialism, social justice, gender rights, the complexity of cultural and national identity. How did you select the artists, and what was your curatorial approach in creating the narrative of the exhibition?

WLP: From the start, we had a particular remit we wanted to look at, which was how Latin American artists explored the themes through the lens of the body. However, we started researching into the history of Latin America as an invented construct and the related terminology, which inevitably led to an analysis of its colonial past and how this affects contemporary society. This gave us an initial overview of themes we felt needed to be addressed. From the beginning, it was also very important for us to find

sources that came both from Latin Americans and non-Latin Americans, to get a good sense of all the perspectives and voices.

There are of course many paths one could follow, but we felt that identity and representation were the most relevant to what we wanted to explore and to the gallery's programme. Conversely, the discovery of some artists uncovered new areas that we could explore within the exhibition.

From this story arc, a manner of threads and narratives appeared. In order to piece all these stories together, we created a narrative map, which in turn, also helped inform the design and visitor experience of the exhibition. Instead of segregating the artworks into distinct themes, we decided to open up the gallery space, making the most of the walls and ceiling. This meant that the artworks, which overlapped in terms of subject matter, could be connected. In addition, this opened up the possibility to create interesting juxtapositions and polar opposites.

In dialogue with Sabina Collares, artist and activist

FL: Within your work, you question traditional Eurocentric narratives and aesthetic.

According to you, what responsibility do artists have in a postcolonial society?

Sabina Collares (SC): The criticism of the Eurocentric monopoly in culture carries on to be challenged because it still remains in course. By addressing colonialism in my work, I am not only talking about its legacy but also a very present modus operandi in contemporary society. We can say, that notions of heteronormativity, nuclear family, gender binarism, patriarchy, racism, etc. are all part of the colonial mind-set, and it does not take further analysis to perceive how those ideas still inform us about ourselves and

others. Those, and many other ideas imposed during colonial times, were an attempt to validate (and still carry on legitimizing) many forms of violence amongst people. We, as artists, have the chance to challenge them, proposing new possibilities in the world, as well as stimulating other forms of authentic self-expression. Therefore, I chose to criticize the imposition of Eurocentric narratives by re-appropriating their own allegories and aesthetic in order to retell stories I once read.

In this way, we are creating history every single moment, and to be aware of this gives us room for possibilities, autonomy, reflection, for transgression and so on. It is our responsibility to build the world we want to live in.

FL: *Crisi de Identidade* (2018) addresses the multi-layered and composite nature of identity. In a variegated landscape of crossing points of ethnicity and cultural encounters, DNA tests – such as the one you took – somehow challenge assumptions about identity and heritage. What drove you to take the test in the first place?

SC: I think it was almost inevitable that reading so much about the history of Brazil, would lead me to question my own story. Knowing much about our past generations, I think, is not as usual as it seems. In Brazil, this can be explained in a number of ways, such as the destruction of important documents regarding slavery trade and also the lack of documentation of individuals in the first centuries of the European settlement. In essence, it is hard to track who our family is, and where they come from. So my work also addresses this difficulty, which can be experienced in Brazil when it comes to understanding parts of our history and heritage.

FL: *A exótica* (2017) is a commentary to stereotypical and reductive representations of the Brazilian society as a fascinating tropical paradise. Do you believe that these

images of Brazil are still very present within the public discourse and contemporary visual narratives?

SC: Definitely, they are. For example, just a few weeks ago, the former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro stated: ‘Anyone who wants to come here and have sex with a woman, be my guest. But, we can’t be known for being a gay paradise’. These words not only reinforce the idea that Brazil is a sexual tourism destination and that women are a commodity for men, but also exposes the homophobic views that so many still share in the country.

And the exotic-erotic narrative, that is a product of a colonial mind-set, still carries on defining our society outside Brazil. These ideas also operate at unconscious level, shaping the perception of ourselves and others. As well as directly impacting on our daily routine and bodies in many forms of discrimination and oppression, such as targeting, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and so on.

FL: Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1989) famously stated: ‘Where once we could believe in the comforts and continuity of Tradition, today we must face the responsibilities of cultural Translation’. Does living across different cultures and countries influence your perspective on social debates and your creative vision?

SC: I think it was exactly in the moment that I left Brazil that I became even more Brazilian, because as a foreigner you are always being enquired about your heritage and this constant question made me truly think about what it meant to be Brazilian, a Latin woman, a foreigner and to question the fluidity of my own identity as something that shape-shifts constantly.

And it is exactly my work that allows me to stay connected to my roots, to find more authentic forms of self-expression and as well as being a means for me to exist in the world. This cultural exchange is crucial for me, and I am learning everyday how to build my individuality collectively.

In dialogue with Lucía Cuba, fashion designer and researcher

FL: You are a social researcher, a fashion designer and an activist. How do your social research and design process converge in your work?

Lucía Cuba (LC): I understand my design work as one founded in social research-driven processes, one that gains support from methods and techniques that I am able to apply and adapt to my own design/art praxis, as well as one from which I end up analysing, modifying and strengthening both the projects and the impacts that I aim these to have. This convergence can also be directly understood in the areas or topics in which I am still interested in working on through my current design practice, such as those related to public health, sexual and reproductive rights, amongst others.

FL: In *Artículo 6* (2011–18) exhibited within *Mundo LatinX* you bring awareness to the issues indigenous women often face in contemporary Peru, such as forced sterilizations and violation of gender rights. Can you tell me about your collaboration with the local communities – in this case, of women – while shaping your work? What were their reactions to your creations?

LC: Since the project was created in 2011, it aimed to reach the general public, both at local and international level, but more specifically people living in different cities across Peru. As a Peruvian citizen, being aware of and able to share with a larger audience information that had already been gathered and that was available but politically and strategically ‘hidden’, meant strengthening efforts to bring this particular case in to a public agenda, but especially to broaden the conversations regarding how women’s human rights are constantly being violated.

At state level, this happens through arbitrary, gender-biased, heteronormative laws and strong conservative standards that prevent women to access quality information on their sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as to access quality-based public health services.

In this context, it was crucial for me to highlight one concrete horrifying example of what happens on a daily basis to women in Peru, but also around the world, where the power and conservative beliefs of some determine the prevalence or extinction of others. Where laws and regulations are created in favour of those who can afford private health or bribe the legal system, where the poor and the extremely poor populations are manipulated and placed at the bottom of a conception of what human rights are.

Even though the starting point of the project is, of course, the still-unsolved (until this day) case of over three thousand women in Peru that were forcefully sterilized during the government of Alberto Fujimori (between 1996 and 2000), it does try to reach out to a broader audience.

To be able to develop this, I began by contacting two activists who were engaged with the case since the first complaints were made, as well as with the legal search for justice of a group of women from Anta-Cusco. Thirteen years have passed since the first

complaints appeared, yet this episode of our human rights history appeared to be erased from our social tissue.

The more I researched and learned about the state of the case, the more I came to understand my own limitations in terms of approaching this case, in 2011. I was aware that I would not be able to solve the case, or directly help those affected in legal or more formal terms, but I did come to understand that, through the medium of design, I could at least trigger a set of conversations that may invite other citizens to learn and think about what had happened, and how important is to recognize this for understanding the state of our own sexual and reproductive rights.

Over the course of seven years, I feel very fortunate to have witnessed solidarity, awareness and calls for action from many individuals and organizations from a diverse set of disciplines. If we do not create more platforms to talk about these issues, our rights might be perpetually invisibilized and/or violated.

FL: I am very interested in your use of text and the idea of cloth as a medium. In your creative process, you play with graphic design, typography, and multiple languages; at times, the use of text is very explicit. What is the idea informing your use of text across projects such as *Articulo 6*?

LC: The idea is to objectively use typography and texts as remarks, questioning and forms that may allow for multiple ways of interacting and interpreting the works.

For *Articulo 6*, I also intentionally use text underscoring literacy processes, as those that were violated in the reading of the case were, for example, men and women who were Quechua language speakers, and did not know how to read and write. They were

given informed consent forms in Spanish, as they were also asked through coercion to sign something that they were actually not fully able to read and understand.

Language, as understood across my works and projects, plays as a central role: one that has the power to oppress and free, to perpetuate or to generate progress.

FL: Your cultural heritage is a crucial aspect of your work. Does living across different cultures and countries influence your perspective on social debates and/or your creative vision?

LC: I was born in Lima, Peru, where I've lived the majority of my life. Growing up in Peru in the early '80s meant dealing with a social and economic crisis. While we were 'lucky' enough not to have faced what other people dealt with in other cities of the country – where terrorism and military violence lacerated entire communities – our way of life was also affected. For years, we lived under a curfew, in deep economic crisis and constant fear. Since I can remember, words as 'car bomb', 'disappearing', 'common pit', were frequently used and, sadly, part of an everyday narrative.

One tends to normalize these type of stories, but also learns how to live in a context that was – and still is – very violent, dangerous and chaotic. By having the opportunity to live outside of Peru, I've also come to recognize how strongly embedded these systems of violence – and strategies to survive and adapt to it – are in our everyday life experience. From taking 'extra care' of my belongings, regardless of where I am, to feeling that I have a special sense to detect danger. We live in an absolutely violent world, especially for women. I've also come to understand a sense of Latinamericanness, citizenship and womanhood that is both local and global, as well

as the fact that, no matter where you are, you can always do something to transform this world into a more equal, just and happier place.

FL: Considering the very challenging political climate that we are experiencing worldwide, we – as fashion scholars and practitioners— cannot avoid questioning the political relevance of fashion and the impact it may have on society and politics. Within your vision, what power or agency do fashion/wearable forms have in terms of social change?

LC: The power to impact, question, make-believe and create alternative living forms. The wearers' experience is a universal one.

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