

# If the Grid Is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art<sup>1</sup>

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1. Curator José Falconi commissioned this article on account of Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck's exhibition *pedacito de cielo (1998–2008)* in the Sert Gallery at the Carpenter Center, Harvard University, in early 2008. Due to funding constraints, the essay was never published. I would like to thank the editors at *Oxford Art Journal* for reviewing the present work and providing it a home in these pages. In particular, I am grateful to Simon Baker for his editorial comments.

2. See, for example, Pablo de la Barra, 'Pinta London: A New Chapter in the Expansion of Latin American Art', *ArtDaily*, 28 April 2010, [http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int\\_sec=11&int\\_new=37705](http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=37705) (accessed 18 August 2010); as well as the headline for *Artfacts*, <http://www.artfacts.net/en/exhibition/pinta-london-2010-213588/overview.html> (accessed 18 August 2010).

3. On 13 November 2007, I held a conversation with Brazilian artist Waltercio Caldas at the Americas Society in New York as part of the institution's public programmes. The conversation was advertised as an opening event for Pinta and promoted as part of the city's second annual Latin American Culture Week (10–21 November 2007).

4. The respective venues for these exhibitions were as follows: New York University's Grey Art Gallery and The Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas Austin; the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, CIFO in Miami; The Museum of Modern Art in New York; and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Exhibitions of geometric abstraction with a European venue have included: *Gego: Defying Structures* at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (2006–2007); *Hélio Oiticica: The Body of Color* at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Tate Modern (2007); *Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, and the Fundação Iberê Camargo in Porto Alegre (2009–2010).

'If the grid is the new palm tree of Latin American art we are making progress'. The words are Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck's, spoken on the occasion of the first iteration of Pinta: The Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art Fair. Inaugurated on 15 November 2007, it constituted the first fair dedicated to Latin American art in New York City. More recently, the fair has extended its reach and supplemented its New York presence with a transatlantic instalment: Pinta London. Touted in the contemporary press as 'A New Chapter in the Expansion of Latin American Art', Pinta London took place on 3–6 June 2010.<sup>2</sup>

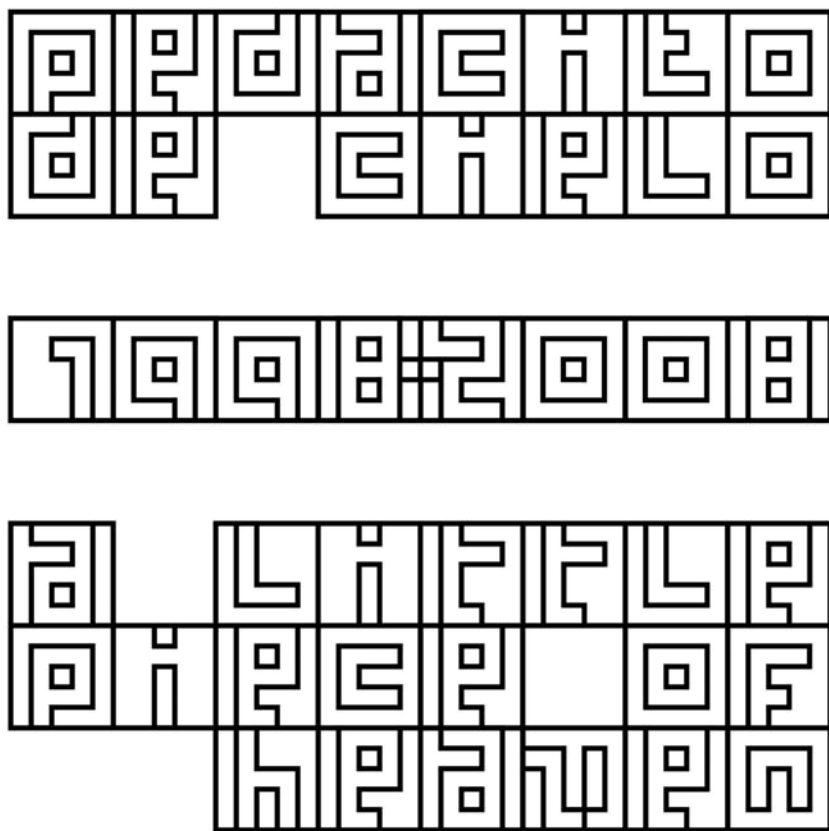
In his work, Balteo Yazbeck, an emerging artist from Venezuela, deploys the language of Modernist abstraction, including the grid, in order to infuse its forms with contemporary political concerns. With his 2007 comment, Balteo Yazbeck rather cheekily made clear that the works for sale at Pinta (among them his own video *Análisis* from 2000) participated in a broader sea change in the exhibition and packaging of Latin American art, at least in the USA.<sup>3</sup> To put it crudely, the shift from the 'palm tree' to the 'grid' – i.e. from an image of 'nature' to 'culture' – has been echoed in the numerous exhibitions dedicated to geometric abstraction in recent years in the USA and increasingly in Europe: *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (2007); *The Sites of Latin American Abstraction* (2007); *New Perspectives in Latin American Art, 1930–2006: Selections from a Decade of Acquisitions* (2007–2008); and *Dimensions of Constructive Art in Brazil: The Adolpho Leirner Collection* (2007), among other exhibitions on individual artists such as Gego and Hélio Oiticica.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Balteo Yazbeck's remark also speaks to the history of geometric abstraction in Latin America, grafting as it does, two discursive moments and thus two understandings of 'progress' (however suspect such a notion may be). On the one hand, the present 'progress' has been effected in so far as many of the works on view at Pinta, as well as in the aforementioned exhibitions, provide an alternative image of modern art production in Latin America. The presentation of geometric abstraction still runs counter to the dominant cultural imaginary whereby the art of these twenty-three countries must look either straightforwardly political (as in Mexican muralism), 'fantastic' (in the tradition of Frida Kahlo), or hyper-realist (like Tomás Sánchez, whose work, incidentally, contained the only painting of palm trees at the 2007 Pinta fair). On the other hand, Balteo Yazbeck's observation unwittingly conjures the origins of geometric abstraction in the Americas in the late 1940s and 1950s, a time when artists – from Venezuelan kinetic artists to São Paulo concretists – turned to abstraction as a way to inscribe themselves, as it were, within a universal conception of modern art, while at once attempting to create an art of *compromiso social* (social commitment) and

thereby tapping into abstraction's utopian origins. In the case of this earlier moment, universalism as instantiated in the non-mimetic principles of composition underwriting geometric abstraction (the grid) ultimately became aligned with individual states' ideologies of modern industrial development. Thus the paradox of geometric abstraction in the Americas: artists turned to abstraction as a means by which to achieve the Universal at the same time that their abstract forms became a new iconography mobilised towards nationalist and official governmental ends. In the case of Venezuela, this was perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the local art market and in the monumental application of works of art to various urban and public projects, images of which form the introduction to Balteo Yazbeck's exhibition *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), which was organised by José Falconi at the Sert Gallery in Harvard University's Carpenter Center in early 2008 (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>

It is worth lingering on Balteo Yazbeck's comment about the grid's value – at once symbolic and economic – because it is through its redoubling of two moments of 'progress' that we might frame *pedacito de cielo*, which stages a return to the earlier moment, to the 1950s and Venezuela's state-led modernisation as evidenced in Carlos Raúl Villanueva's massive architectural projects in Caracas. With *pedacito de cielo*, Balteo Yazbeck presents what he calls a '*sui generis* museum'; but his is a museum that is not concerned with the accurate reconstruction of events in a way that would present history as

5. On the conflictual impulses motivating kinetic art and its universality as a 'compensatory fiction', see Ariel Jiménez, 'Neither Here Nor There', in Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez (eds), *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London; Museum of Fine Arts: Houston, 2004), pp. 247–53. See Hannia Gómez, 'Soto, ciudad y arquitectura', in *Soto a Gran Escala* (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas: Caracas, 2003), pp. 30–5.



**Fig. 1.** Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, typographic composition of the exhibition title using Puntal with Box Outline font, 2006. In 2000 Álvaro Sotillo designed the font for *Punto 68*, the magazine of the School of Architecture and Urban Studies, Universidad Central de Venezuela. (Courtesy: the artist and Vision Alternativa, Caracas.)

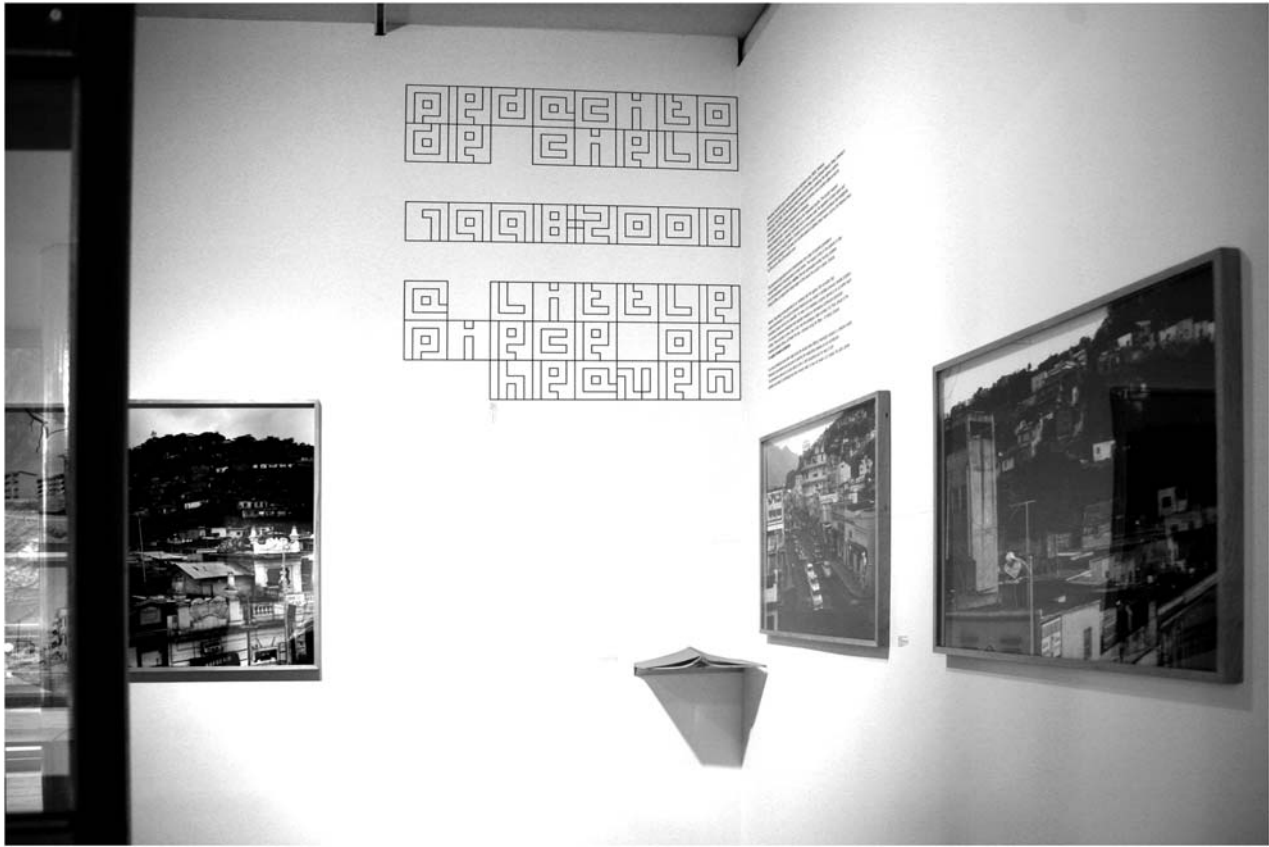


Fig. 2. Installation view of the entry hall. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

6. Antonieta Sosa (b. 1940) is a conceptual and performance artist from Venezuela. Most recently, her work was featured in the national pavilion of Venezuela in the fifty-third Venice Biennial in 2009 and in this year's twenty-ninth São Paulo Biennial. Eugenio Espinoza (b. 1950) more specifically engages institutional critique, drawing attention to architecture, the limits of spectator participation, as well as the understanding of art's significance and its potential misreading. Claudio Perna (1938–1997) developed a rich body of conceptual work, also exploring issues related to geography and mapping. Together with Espinoza, he introduced experiments in Land Art to Venezuela.

7. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck and Lianor da Cunha, 'Errata', exh. handout, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008) (Sert Gallery/Harvard University: Cambridge, 2008). All subsequent citations by the artist are taken from this text.

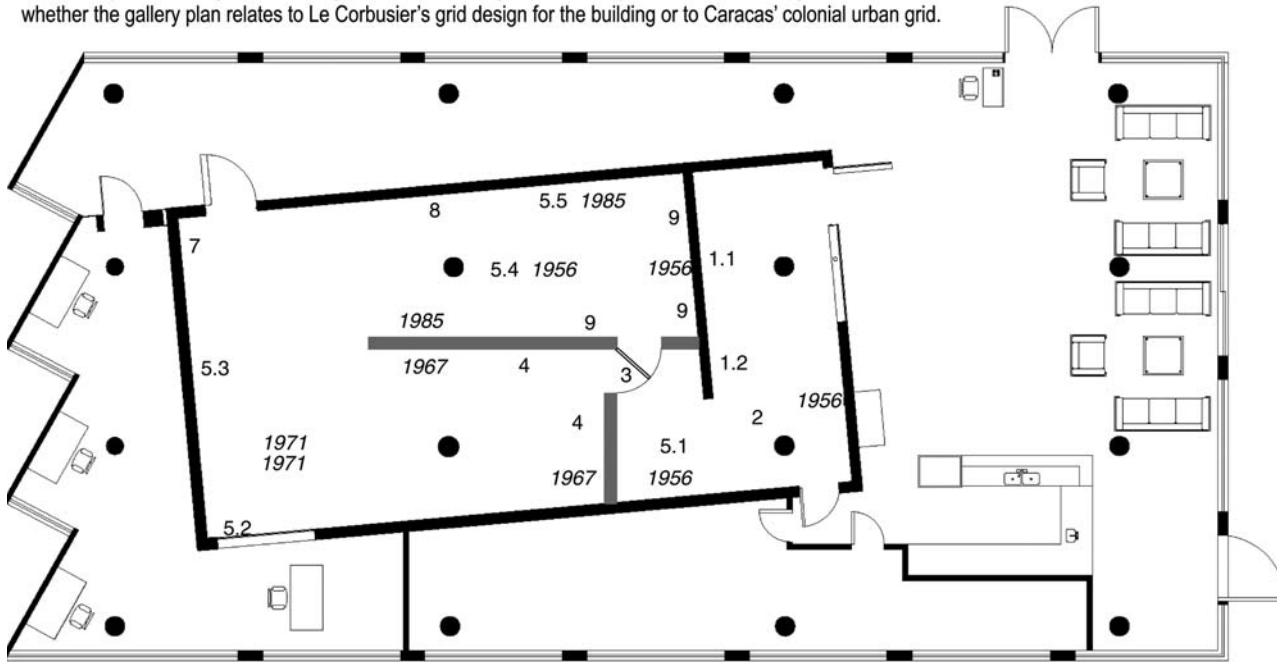
the consequence of individual actors (the 'historian's history' *pace* Foucault), nor one that would insist on the autonomy of modern art independent of its sociopolitical context. Rather, by juxtaposing works by Villanueva, Alejandro Otero, Gego, Miguel Arroyo, among others, together with a subsequent generation of artists – including Antonieta Sosa, Eugenio Espinoza, and Claudio Perna<sup>6</sup> – the exhibition suggested how the discourse of modernisation and aesthetic modernism in Venezuela was articulated on the basis of social relations (what Balteo Yazbeck, following Eliseo Sierra, calls a 'community of meaning'), charting the often-contradictory responses to the state's urban development programme and its attendant myth of progress here embodied in the figure of the grid (Fig. 2). By further including archival documents ranging from photographs to books, Balteo Yazbeck mobilises this history not only to interrogate it, but also to ask how we are to understand its legacy in the present.

Upon arrival to *pedacito de cielo*, visitors were provided with an errata sheet, which boldly announced that, 'The artist/curator still does not understand how to separate art-making from curating'.<sup>7</sup> Despite this unconventional address to the visitor, the errata sheet nevertheless mimicked a conventional gallery handout (Fig. 3). The form's communicative conceit was underscored by a reproduction of the Sert Gallery's architectural floor plan. On its front page, numbers identify objects within the space of the plan and corresponded to a legend with descriptions located on the bottom two-thirds of the page. In this way, one could walk through the exhibition shuffling between the space of

**ERRATA. The artist/curator still does not understand how to separate art-making from curating.**

Edited by Lianor da Cunha

The artist/curator failed to explain why all the interior gray walls (see diagram below) added to the obviously skewed Sert Gallery were re-aligned according to Le Corbusier's grid for the *Carpenter Center* building. Also he never clarified whether the gallery plan relates to Le Corbusier's grid design for the building or to Caracas' colonial urban grid.



1. The introductory architecture hall is too didactic. It isn't consistent with the rest of the exhibition.
  - 1.1 There is something fishy about the colors in Gasparini's images.
  - 1.2 One of the vintage photographs belonging to the architecture hall was lost during the installation process.
2. The artist/curator struggled with the obvious difficulty of bringing buildings and their polychrome façades into an art show.
3. Duchamp's *Door, 11 rue Larrey* (1927) was barred from the exhibition for safety reasons. Because of the gallery layout, it would have been a safety hazard.
4. There is no mention of the fact that the *Expansionismo* exhibit (Caracas, 1967) was curated by Omar Carreño, also an artist. Nor is there any mention that Miguel Arroyo, an artist as well, is the emblematic figure of curatorial practice in Venezuela.
5. The artist/curator failed to mention that the idea of *entanglement* is somehow present in the works of the other artists in the show, for example:
  - 5.1 Villanueva's requirements for polychromy in his buildings, to be designed by painters like Otero, in a move to transcend Mondrian's practice.
  - 5.2 Espinoza's pieces for the *First Young Artists' Salon* may be proto-entanglements of GeGo with Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenburg, Mel Bochner and Bruce Naumar
  - 5.3 Perna's appropriation practices may be seen as proto-entanglements without text.
  - 5.4 Arroyo's bench and its shadow refer to Otero's *Coloritmos* and also to indigenous practices of painting and weaving.
  - 5.5 GeGo's *Paperless Drawing No. 10* may be an entanglement of drawing and sculptural practices.
6. The curator has a fixation with selecting works by different artists from the same year (note these years in the diagram above):
  - 1956: Villanueva's building for the School of Architecture and Urban Studies, Otero's polychrome façades and Arroyo's platform-bench.
  - 1967: Sosa's *Untitled* and Sotillo's *Untitled*.
  - 1971: GeGo's *Reticularrea Cuadrada* and Espinoza's *Untitled* and photographs of other work by Espinoza.
  - 1985: Sosa's *Sloth* and GeGo's *Paperless Drawing No. 10*.
7. The artist/curator, just like any government, keeps exploiting images of poor people for his own purposes.
8. There is no explanation on the label for why one of the photographs of the *Oil Project* is hung so high on the wall (89 inches from the floor), or why there are two screws above it at 100 inches from the floor. Maybe the reason for this is that the oil barrel price was 89 dollars the day the piece was installed in the gallery, and that a few weeks earlier the barrel price reached the one hundred dollar record (benchmark).
9. The presence of the mosaics and the two photographs of the School of Architecture and Urban Studies building surrounding Otero's *Coloritmo* are unexplained. It is kind of fishy that there is a book opened to a page of Otero's crumbling polychrome mosaics on a shelf to the right.

Fig. 3. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck and Lianor da Cunha, Errata, 2008. (Courtesy: the authors.)



The artist/curator never mentions whether the exhibition is a group or a solo show.

The artist/curator did not explain his idea of *entanglement*: putting artworks by two different artists very close to each other. He also didn't dare to add a new label suggesting that two pieces so close together might become an assemblage of his own creation. He prefers the less risky argument that the whole show is an entanglement, as the label for *pedacito de cielo* (next to the mosaics) suggests.

The artist/curator could not find a bigger space or budget for all the artwork and documents pertinent to Caracas' modernism and its consequences, which he desires for this exhibition.

There are some inconsistencies in the labels and in the continuity of the pencil lines on the walls.

The artist/curator never clarified if the pencil lines on the gallery walls function as Le Corbusier's *Modulor's* navel and eye levels, (44.5 and 63 inches high) or if they relate to Mel Bochner's gallery interventions.

To select the grid as a leitmotif for the show might exaggerate the relationship between art and architecture in Caracas. It might also exaggerate the relationship between the grid and Caracas, and the grid and art.

There are no photographs documenting the current state of Caracas city. All the photographs in the architecture hall are from the 1950's.

There is a bias towards Villanueva's government-supported architectural projects, which overlooks other architectural developments.

There is some irony in the fact that the artist/curator is bringing the very architecture that was intended to transform the city into a museum, into an art gallery.

The artist/curator shamelessly included all his 'art' collection and documents in the show next to other important artworks from really important collections.

The artist/curator failed to disclose to the public the close relationships (in some cases student/professor) between the artists in the show, which includes him of course.

Another hyper-didactic item in the exhibition (apart from this *Errata* document) is the fact that the artist/curator always spells GeGo with two capital G's, to emphasize Gerd Leufert's operation to simplify Gertrude Goldschmidt's name for the Venezuelan people.

The artist/curator failed to write a curatorial text and at the last minute was tempted to include the quotation below, found by mistake, as if this would solve his intellectual and organizational problems:

"In terms of art, the *musée sentimental* raises the question of the fundamental role of the artist, his social and critical responsibility, and his link to history. Where many artists try desperately to create meaning for a community out of the invisible or the supernatural, Spoerri simply juxtaposed objects that already possessed communal meaning and power, given by history and not by the individual decision of an artist. Unextravagant in the exhibition design, he used normal museological display, hanging, lighting, and vitrines for the objects to be protected and seen in good light on eye level.

During this century, the definition of art as a completely autonomous field has proven obsolete. By the same token, the equation that art is life and vice versa, as defined in the sixties, could not last long. Perhaps most valuable to remember, is as Filliou, a close friend of Daniel Spoerri, has said, that art is what makes life more interesting than art."

Jean-Hubert Martin in *Visual Display, Culture Beyond Appearances*, edited by Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen. Bay Press Seattle 1995, p. 67.

Some friends of the artist/curator think he has sabotaged his mosaic artwork by putting it in such a complex historical context. Self-exiled individuals have a tendency to become sentimental and even nostalgic. Artists may also have self-destructive tendencies, however curators are not known for these kind of issues.

Fig. 3. (continued)

the plan, the physical space of an object's installation, as well as the verbal descriptions. Even as his status as the 'author' of the text is situated at a remove in as much as the errata was written in the third person and edited by Lianor da Cunha – it is nevertheless through his recourse to this façade that Balteo Yazbeck assumes access to the language of the institution and the publication venue usually reserved for the curator or the institutional 'voice' (so often unauthored) embodied in a gallery handout. Placed just outside the exhibition on a pedestal, the errata sheet acted as if it succeeded within and participated in the conventions of museum education as instantiated in a handout that informed visitors not only of the content and scope of a given exhibition but also of the physical placement of the objects.

Although the errata sheet upheld the aforementioned conventions, the language which Balteo Yazbeck used to explain the logic of the show was one that revelled in the obviousness of his recourse to discrepancies, withholding information, and an ultimate failure to transparently communicate: 'The artist/curator failed to explain why all the interior gray walls [of the Sert Gallery] ... were re-aligned according to Le Corbusier's grid for the Carpenter Center building'; 'There is no mention of the fact that the *Expansionismo* exhibit (Caracas, 1967) was curated by Omar Carreño, also an artist'; 'The artist/curator failed to mention that the idea of entanglement is somehow present in the work of the other artists in the show'; 'It is kind of fishy that there is a book opened to a page of Otero's crumbling polychrome mosaics on a shelf to the right'; and, on the reverse side, the notes (no longer corresponding to an object's number) continue: 'The artist/curator never mentions whether the exhibition is a group or solo show'; 'To select the grid as a leitmotif for the show might exaggerate the relationship between art and architecture in Caracas'.

The errata's text, then, was inconsistent, and its statements made no attempt to present a unified conceptual framework within which to understand *pedacito de cielo*, nor did they even really identify the objects exhibited therein, instead speaking to what is 'fishy', 'difficult', or 'exaggerated' about the work and its attendant display, which was also designed by the artist. Any claim to provide authoritative information about how to understand the exhibition was asserted only while in the same breath being immediately undone. The discrepancy between the handout's structure and content enacts what could be called, following the work of Jacques Derrida, a performative or pragmatic contradiction.<sup>8</sup> That is, when reading the handout, the reader recognises that the one who speaks – in this case Balteo Yazbeck – is saying the opposite of what a gallery handout is usually meant to *do*. He appropriates a form of authority (the gallery handout) and in so doing uses this 'authority' to redirect the form's communicative function towards critical and not just informative ends. By thus acting within the discursive space to which his disruptions belong, Balteo Yazbeck's errata probe what it might mean to conceive of an exhibition and its conditions of possibility, organised according to the inevitable fissures and omissions that underwrite all museum presentations, but that are normally kept at bay. What is key here is that the constitutive force of his 'explanatory' statements derives precisely from these gaps and errata, rather than from his statements' consistency or any attendant claims to narrate the 'truth'.

Of course, this is not the first time that an artist has questioned the authority of the museum or gallery as a cultural institution by miming its conventions. From Duchamp's portable museum in *La Boîte-en-Valise* (1941) to Oldenberg's *Store* (1961), avant-garde artists have engaged the framing

8. See Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*; or, *The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998), p. 3.



**Fig. 4.** Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*, 1972. Installation view. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SABAM, Brussels.

9. The bibliography on artists' museums and institution critique is extensive. Among other notable work, please refer to Brian O'Doherty's inaugural 1976 essay republished as *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1999); A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (eds), *Museums by Artists* (Art Metropole: Toronto, 1983); Craig Owens, 'From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After "The Death of the Author"?', in Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (eds), *Beyond Recognition* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1992), pp. 122–39; Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1993); Hal Foster, 'Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1996), pp. 171–203; Christian Kravagna (ed), *The Museum as Arena: Artists on Institutional Critique* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König: Cologne, 2001). More recent publications include John C. Welchman (ed), *Institutional Critique and After* (JRP/Ringier: Zurich, 2006); Jennifer Gonzalez, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 2008); and Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 2009).

10. See Benjamin Buchloh's entry for '1972a', in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh (eds), *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Thames and Hudson: New York, 2004), pp. 549–53.

11. Marcel Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward', trans. Paul Schmidt, *October*, no. 42, Fall 1987, p. 47.

12. For a more comprehensive analysis of Broodthaers's fictions, see, for example, Benjamin Buchloh, 'The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers', in *Museums by Artists*, pp. 45–56; Douglas Crimp, 'This Is Not a Museum of Art', in *On the Museum's Ruins*, pp. 200–34.

13. See the 1957 statement reproduced in Juan José Martín Frechilla, *Diálogos reconstruidos para*

elements of aesthetic production and reception, both institutional and commercial.<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is worthwhile invoking Marcel Broodthaers's well-known founding of the Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXième siècle (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, Nineteenth Century Section), a four-year project that initially began in the artist's studio in Brussels in 1968. As a 'fictive' institution, Broodthaers's Musée, nevertheless, engaged in the discursive activities of a real one: as the museum's 'director' he circulated *lettres ouvertes* stamped with the 'official' name and address of the Musée, organised inaugural speeches, exhibitions of its various sections, as well as publicity campaigns.<sup>10</sup>

In the summer of 1972 at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, Broodthaers presented the museum's 'Section des Figures' under the title 'The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present'. Amassing 266 objects representing eagles, the exhibition borrowed objects from forty-three 'real' museums and private collections, including Broodthaers's own. Displayed in glass cases or hung on the wall, each eagle object (from its presence in banal objects such as postage stamps to its uses in military iconography and advertising) was accompanied by a small plastic plaque that replaced the conventional exhibition label with the statement 'This is not a work of art' printed in English, French, or German (Fig. 4). As remarked by Broodthaers, the statement 'This is not a work of art' derives from 'a formula obtained by the contraction of a concept by Duchamp and an antithetical concept by Magritte'.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, the nomination 'This is a work of art' imputed to Duchamp's 1917 readymade *Fountain* challenged what could and could not be considered to be a work of art. By offering a porcelain urinal as a work of art in the context of an open entry exhibition, Duchamp's readymade contested the principles underlying the notions of autonomous art objects and expressive artists at the same time. Broodthaers, however, further complicated Duchamp's nominalist gesture by offering an alternative proposition as mediated by Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treason of Images*, which plays on the incongruity of visual and verbal signification with the statement 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' painted just beneath the pipe. In so doing, Broodthaers shifts the stakes from what object can or cannot be legitimately called art to the institutional authority that underwrites museum classification and display as instantiated in his museum labels and their relationship to his rather absurd presentation of eagles from all media and genres, both high and low.<sup>12</sup> With his shift from art producer to administrator and his cultivation of a series of museum fictions, Broodthaers sought to draw attention to the language and institutions within which art and its discourse are framed.

Returning to *pedacito de cielo*, the work's pedagogical conceit continued in the exhibition's entry hall, which provided architectural, artistic, and socio-political context through its presentation of photography, typography, magazines, books, and informative statements by critic and curator Eliseo Sierra (Fig. 5). 'The introductory hall', the errata confesses, 'is too didactic. It isn't consistent with the rest of the exhibition'. Here Paolo Gasparini's photographs of urban projects at Lomas de Urdaneta and Ciudad Tablitas are hung next to photographs of *ranchos* (shantytowns), thereby juxtaposing the *desarrollista* (developmentalist) desire to build a 'new [modern] Caracas' through the production of various housing superblocs with the shantytowns that continued (and continue) to exist alongside these 'urban solutions'.<sup>13</sup> Photographs of Unidad Residencial El Paraíso (El Paraíso Residential Unit) were placed next to a book with reproductions of Alejandro Otero's





**Fig. 5.** Installation view of the entry hall. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: José Falconi. (Courtesy: the artist and José Falconi.)

*Ortogonales* (*Orthogonals*); scanned collaged fragments of the latter were also placed within the frame of an *El Paraíso* photograph, abutting the unit's façade.<sup>14</sup> Here, the weave of the *Ortogonales*' coloured-paper rhymed with the building's surface colour breaks, as registered by the tonal variations in the black and white photographs, visually reinforcing Otero's polychromatic contribution to Villanueva's architecture and urban design.

Where *pedacito de cielo*'s entry hall established the context, the exhibition continued with a video projection showing Villanueva's Architecture and Urban Studies building at the Ciudad Universitaria, while, through recourse to a photograph by Gasparini, it focused more specifically on Otero's addition: his monumental *Policromía* (Fig. 6).<sup>15</sup> Constructed of glass mosaic tiles in two shades of blue, one lighter and the other deeper, the colours are arranged in rectangular and square blocks on the building's west façade. As played out in Balteo Yazbeck's video, the material conditions that the *Policromía* inhabits – i.e. the light and sky, their attendant changes depending on the season and time of day – modify the perception of its blue-coloured surface, as the blues alternate in the degree to which they match the video's animation of the colour in the surrounding sky. Where the grid in the work of an artist like Piet Mondrian 'is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature',<sup>16</sup> thereby asserting the autonomy of its pictorial construction, here one might say that Otero has smuggled nature back in. But – and this is crucial – he does so by refusing to represent nature. Instead, the

*una historia de la Caracas moderna* (Universidad Central de Venezuela, Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico: Caracas, 2004), pp. 16–17. More specifically, one only has to consider the *23 de Enero* development, which was the most important large housing project built in Caracas under the auspices of the National Housing Plan. Between 1955 and 1957, thirty-eight superblocks with 9,000 apartments were constructed so as to house more than 60,000 people. See Paulina Villanueva and Maciá Pintó, *Carlos Raúl Villanueva* (Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 2000), pp. 44–9.

14. Balteo Yazbeck produced this collage of several collages by scanning and pasting together various image fragments from Otero's *Ortogonales*.

15. After a seven-year stint in Paris, Alejandro Otero returned to Caracas to collaborate with Villanueva on the Ciudad Universitaria, a project premised on the integration of art and architecture. Otero's most significant contributions were two monumental *Policromías*, one on the School of Pharmacology and the other on the School of Architecture and Urban Studies represented in the video. Although beyond the scope of the present essay, it is important to note





**Fig. 6.** Installation view of the video showing Alejandro Otero's *Polícromía* on the west façade of the School of Architecture and Urban Studies, Universidad Central de Venezuela. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

*Policromía's* relation to its subject (i.e. the Caracas sky) functions like an index: the alternating perception of the two colours is occasioned by an ambient situation in the world that the colours register *as if* through an imprint.<sup>17</sup> The *Policromía* are thus inextricably linked to a little piece of sky (*pedacito de cielo*) in an exhibition about a city described in the video's lyrics, just as in the exhibition's title, as a little piece of heaven (*pedacito de cielo*).<sup>18</sup> By thus dramatising the *Policromía's* relation to its context, the video points to a larger meta-concern about Modernism and its fate in Latin America, one engendered through displacement (of people and ideas), situated in response to local conditions, and thus informed by the complex interrelationships between artistic experimentation, geopolitical context, and identity.<sup>19</sup>

Moving on from the video, on the threshold between the entry hall and the remaining galleries, visitors were asked to continue their exploration of the exhibition imaginatively through Duchamp's *Door, 11 rue Larrey* (1927) (Fig. 7). The *Door* was originally constructed for the artist's studio apartment in Paris. Installed on a double threshold, the *Door* blocks entry to one room as it opens onto another.<sup>20</sup> In the context of *pedacito de cielo*, the *Door* was physically absent (Fig. 8), disallowed from the exhibition for safety reasons, but conceptually present through its mention in the errata. Balteo Yazbeck mines the *Door* for its hyper-functionality, offering a solution – albeit a paradoxical one – for an exhibition that begins and ends with the same work. For whether the visitor envisioned opening the door to the right and turning left, or vice versa, one will end where one began: with images of Otero's *Policromía* in the video and as displayed in the open pages of two copies of a book by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (Fig. 9).<sup>21</sup> But before continuing across one of these two potential thresholds, it is necessary to pause and ask some key questions that should be kept in mind: What kind of an exhibition is represented here? What is the particular modality through which it unfolds? What kind of authority is instantiated or put in question through its display?

If the visitor followed the errata's plan and entered through the doorframe on the left, the exhibition proceeds chronologically, with the exhibited works grouped according to decades: 1956, 1967, 1971, 1985, 1998–2008. If the entry hall did not already make the stakes clear, what the remaining work paraded in front of the viewer was the grid, that mythical figure of modernity, as the generative grammar for the work and documents included in the exhibition (Fig. 10).<sup>22</sup> A few works, all dated 1971, were installed according to Balteo Yazbeck's 'entanglement' method, whereby he places 'artworks by two different artists very close to each other'.<sup>23</sup> Eugenio Espinoza's untitled sculpture hung in the centre of the gallery (Fig. 11): constructed from multiple canvases stitched together and hung horizontally from the ceiling by means of four ropes, the grid painted on the canvases is subject to distortion through the physical force of gravity, which is exacerbated by the twelve fresh coconuts hidden inside the work's seams (and admittedly, one thinks here of a veiled reference to palm trees). But it was not necessary to know the whole story behind this entanglement in order to notice, for example, how Espinoza's work was placed suggestively beneath Gego's *Reticulárea Cuadrada*, also from 1971, as if the slack canvas grid of the former had been literally spawned by the flexible wire grid of the latter.

At the level of exhibition display, the close proximity of Espinoza's and Gego's respective grids motivated what Balteo Yazbeck calls a 'pedagogic entanglement': Gego was, after all, Espinoza's professor.<sup>24</sup> Given that such



Fig. 7. Marcel Duchamp, *Door, 11 rue Larrey*, 1927. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp.



Fig. 8. Installation view of the partition walls showing the intended location for the reconstruction of Duchamp's *Door, 11 rue Larrey*, 1927, in the context of Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

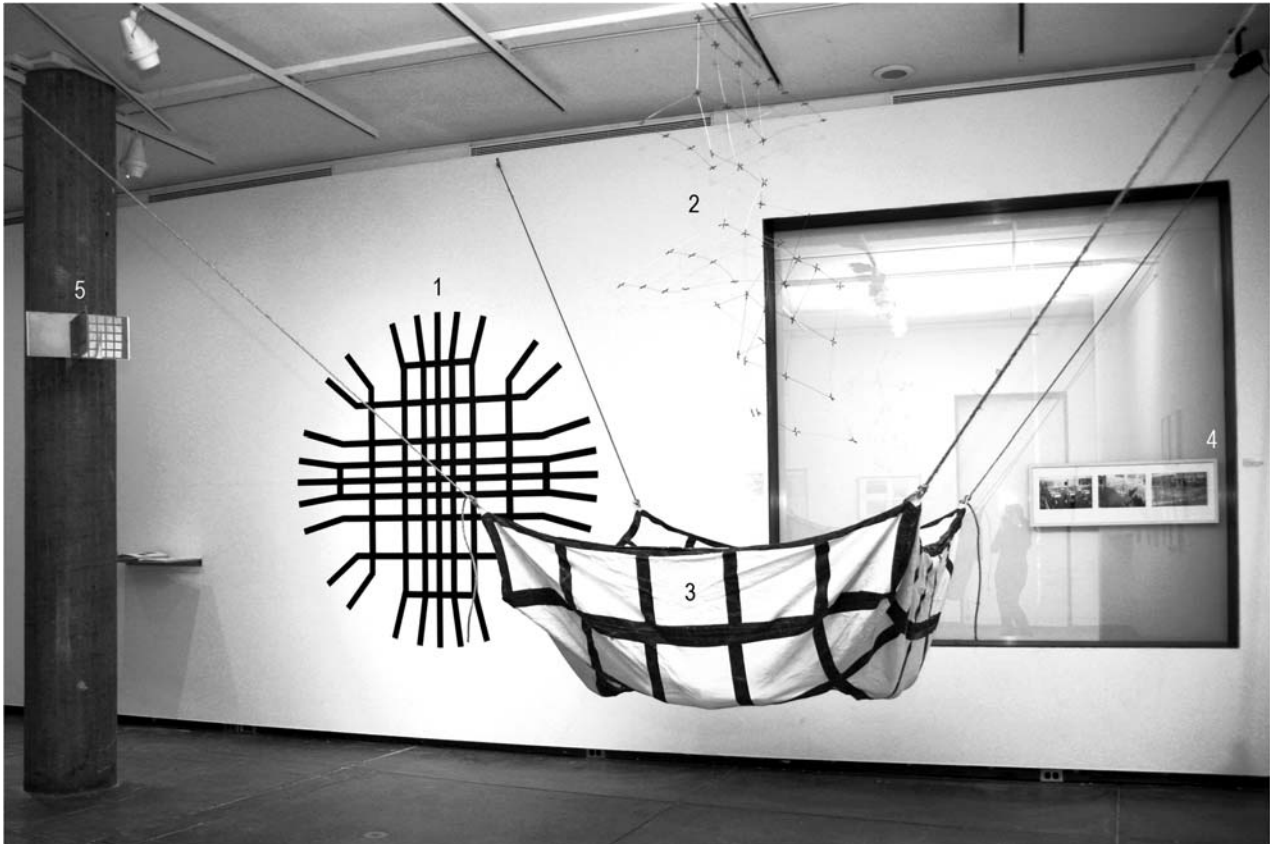
that by insisting on the work as a *policromía* – to be distinguished from the mural – Otero aligns the work with local architectural traditions, extending from colonial churches to private dwellings.



**Fig. 9.** Installation view of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Carlos Raúl Villanueva and the Architecture of Venezuela* (Frederick A. Praeger Publisher: New York, 1964) in the context of Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

entanglements recur throughout the exhibition, to appreciate them, it is necessary to ask whether the visitor should be informed that Gerd Leufert (whose emblematic grid form is installed on a neighbouring wall) and Gego were a couple, and that he introduced her to the work of László Moholy-Nagy, or that Leufert was also the professor of Álvaro Sotillo, who designed Espinoza's 1972 catalogue, also on view. And beyond these 'pedagogic' relations, must one know that Leufert was an installation designer at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas when Miguel Arroyo was its director? Or that the latter collaborated with Gego in the production of the first installation of her *Reticulárea* in 1969 (represented in the exhibition in Claudio Perna's photographs)?<sup>25</sup> To be sure, while such entanglements in part determined the works' installation, what makes *pedacito de cielo* so effective as an entanglement *tout court* is that one need not know these 'facts' in order to observe the way in which the grid is subject to adaptation, elaboration, distortion, and reinvention through the art and documents on display. This much could be grasped quite easily by a brief survey of the exhibition.

If Broodthaers's 'Section des Figures' was driven by a formula produced through 'the contraction of a concept by Duchamp and an antithetical

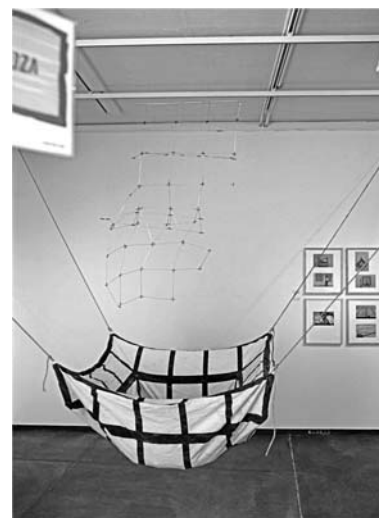


**Fig. 10.** Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *Pedagogic Entanglement of Several Artworks by Others*, 2008. As numbered by the artist, this 'entangled' work includes: (1) Gerd Leufert, vinyl, emblematic form created for Kelemen and Celis Architects, 1969; (2) Gego, *Reticulárea Cuadrada* (Squared Reticulárea), 1971, steel, iron, aluminium. Cisneros Collection, Caracas/New York; (3) Eugenio Espinoza, *Untitled*, 1971 (2007 reconstruction), acrylic on canvas, natural-fibre rope, 12 fresh coconuts; (4) Images of early works by Eugenio Espinoza. Undisclosed photographer, *Untitled*, 1971; (5) Álvaro Sotillo's graphic design for Espinoza's catalogue No. 8, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1972. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

concept by Magritte',<sup>26</sup> it could be argued that *pedacito de cielo* similarly has recourse to a Duchampian tactic in so far as the exhibition's double threshold capitalises on his *Door* as a means by which to secure the exhibition's recursive structure. But arguably, Balteo Yazbeck's notion of 'entanglement' ultimately derives from a practice much closer to home; the fact that by 1969 Gego's previously centred sculptural forms had opened onto a 'reticular practice'.<sup>27</sup> First presented at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas, her seminal *Reticulárea* uses the triangle as its formal grammar, joining the triangles through a special connective ring that allows for a pliant structure to emerge within the repetition of this modular unit (Fig. 12).<sup>28</sup> Comprised of an aggregate of approximately thirty-six individual pieces, the work's series of nets and meshes activated the museum space, producing an immanent spatiality, intended to resist a rationalist ordering of space. With her *Reticulárea*, the spectator is situated physically: one is caught, one might say, within a geometry of the ordinary and immanent, that does not distance but connects, and within a network of lines – with no bottom, top, outside, or inside – that generates a space in which any position of ocular mastery is denied in favour of a lived situation.<sup>29</sup>

While *Reticulárea* may indeed use the triangle as an 'ideal' grammar, there is a marked slippage between the idealist grammar on which the nets are based, and that grammar's appropriation and materialisation in Gego's hands. The *Reticulárea*'s variously clustered forms, its variability, and capacity to change configuration, size, and appearance undoubtedly inform Balteo Yazbeck's entanglements. But beyond the formal and semantic congruity that one might map between the 'reticular' and the 'entangled', Balteo Yazbeck further develops the *Reticulárea*'s social implications. Where Gego's work calls for an active phenomenological spectatorship that enacts a spatio-temporal negotiation, through its recourse to photographic documentation and catalogues, *pedacito de cielo* articulates the placement, location, and contextualisation of the art it entangles. Rather than asking the viewer to engage in an exercise in pseudo-morphic resemblance (i.e. the grid in this work looks like the grid in that work, and thus the grid is a bearer of uniform meanings), in the course of *pedacito de cielo*'s entanglements, the grid is revealed as a signifier and a carrier of multiple significations, at odds with the rationality – and universality – that initially delimited it and that it delimited in turn.<sup>30</sup>

In 1950s Venezuela, the grid, both urban and pictorial, aimed to inscribe Venezuelan cultural production within a continuous tradition of a universal and Modernist art, one further adapted to the country's accelerated industrial, architectural, and urban development. But, as previously evoked, the photographs of *ranchos* in the exhibition's entry hall gave the lie to the myth of progress by showing precisely that which cannot be assimilated to, or erased by, the abstract application of the urban grid. By the 1970s, however, the grid's purported rationality had unraveled: be it through Gego's singular geometry, which foregrounds the immanence of object and perception, or through Espinoza's harnessing of natural forces in the service of the grid's deformation. In 1972, Espinoza, together with Claudio Perna, would more explicitly sully the grid's visualist ideality by appropriating it and placing it within a situation marked by inequality: the *ranchito*. Cartographic signifier of modern 'urban solutions', here the grid, inhabits a site that awaits the restitution of its problems, material, and social. The ailing infrastructure of urban *ranchos* was ultimately redressed, if superficially, by



**Fig. 11.** Installation detail. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *Pedagogic Entanglement of Several Artworks by Others*, 2008. On the back wall: Untitled photographs by Claudio Perna of Eugenio Espinoza's exhibitions at the Museo de Bellas Artes; Ateneo de Caracas; as well as his happening in Coro, Venezuela, 1972. Photo: José Falconi. (Courtesy: the artist and José Falconi.)

16. Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1986), p. 9.

17. See Rosalind Krauss's discussion of indexical signification in 'Notes on the Index: Part 2', in *The Originality of the Avant-garde*, pp. 210–19.

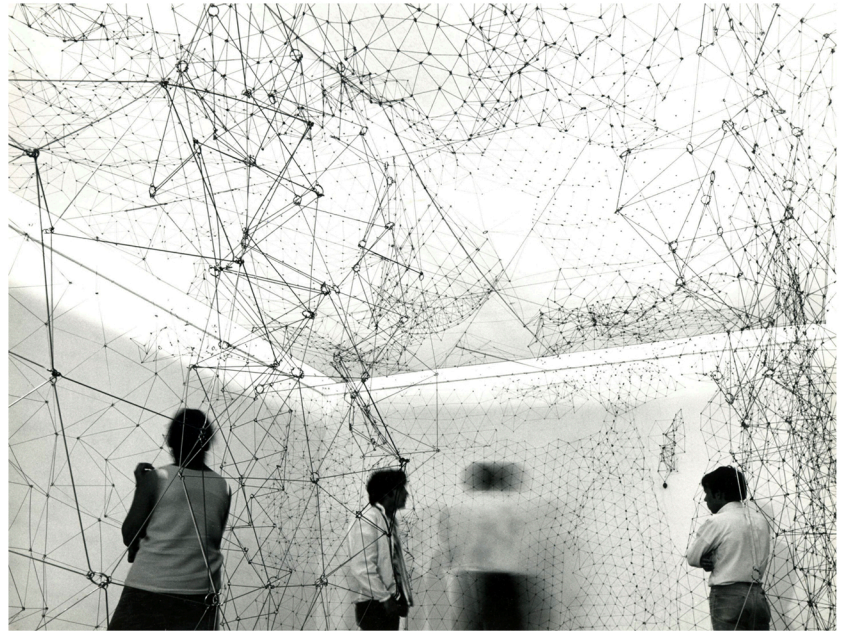
18. In Spanish, *cielo* refers both to the sky and to heaven.

19. I would like to suggest that what is equally at stake in *pedacito de cielo* is the question of *how* to narrate the history of modern art in Latin America without falling into the tropes of the fantastic, peripheral, derivative, imported or even the inverted, as proposed in the title of Mari-Carmen Ramírez's exhibition *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*. Indeed, the terms usually associated with Latin American art – at least in the USA and thus the particular context in which and from which I write – position artists in Latin America as *always already* other or through a model of 'inversion' do not necessarily chip away at the dichotomous thinking that largely subtends such a methodological framework.

20. In the case of Duchamp's apartment, the door opened onto the bathroom and bedroom, respectively.

21. Sibyl Moholoy-Nagy, *Carlos Raúl Villanueva and the Architecture of Venezuela* (Frederick A. Praeger Publisher: New York, 1964). One copy of the book is





**Fig. 12.** Gego, *Reticulárea*, 1969, stainless steel and aluminium wire, variable dimensions, current measurement 540 × 350 × 300 cm. Fundación de Museos Nacionales/Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas. Gego, *Reticulárea (Ambientación)*, 1969. Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas. Photo: Paolo Gasparini. © Archivo Fundación GEGO and Paolo Gasparini. (Courtesy: Fundación GEGO and Paolo Gasparini.)

presented in original; the second copy includes a photographic intervention by Balteo Yazbeck.

22. Some of the works on view are not ‘originals’ but rather reconstructions of artworks produced by Balteo Yazbeck in collaboration with the artist. For example, Antonieta Sosa’s *Relief from Chaotic Forms* (original 1967, reconstruction 2007).

23. Balteo Yazbeck, ‘Errata’.

24. This level of ‘pedagogic’ entanglement is even further entangled. For example, the errata note, which explains the photographs representing the prize-winning works by Eugenio Espinoza, describes the works as ‘proto-entanglements of Gego with Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenberg, Mel Bochner and Bruce Nauman’. By inscribing Espinoza’s work within an international genealogy – at once premised on the immanence of object and perception (Gego), the primacy of ideas (LeWitt, Bochner), and bodily sensation (Nauman, Oldenberg, albeit in different ways) – Balteo Yazbeck broadens the conceptual reach of his definition of entanglement to speak to the international exchanges, readings and misreadings of artistic practices, from which all art emerges.

25. Miguel Arroyo was also Eliseo Sierra’s professor.

26. Marcel Broodthaers, *Ten Thousand Francs Reward*, p. 47.

Plan Caracas in 1976, manipulated images which Balteo Yazbeck installed next to the images of Espinoza and Perna’s collaboration.<sup>31</sup>

The 1980s’ entanglement took the infiltration of the grid with political, economic, and anthropological concerns even further through Rolando Peña’s appropriation of the oil industry’s modular forms, with photographs of oil barrels’ serial repetition and of the grid that supports and articulates its derricks. Dated 1979, these photographs were juxtaposed with an image of Otero’s large-scale civic sculpture *Aguja Solar (Solar Needle)* (1983) (Fig. 13). While Peña’s photographs point to the ‘origin’ and what was at stake in the 1979 international energy crisis, the monumental form of the latter seems to have been constructed precisely because of it. Finally, on the opposing wall, Balteo Yazbeck installed video footage from Antonieta Sosa’s *Pereza (Sloth)* (1985) (Figs. 14 and 15).<sup>32</sup> In a marked contrast with the scaffolding in which the performance took place, Sosa and a young girl move through this three-dimensional grid construction with the listless motion, bodily contortions, and gestures of the idle creature seen in the video’s pendant and from which the work’s title derived. In so doing, they dramatise the ways in which bodies and behaviours escape rigid geometry, while simultaneously drawing attention to larger anthropological questions concerning the legacy of modern architecture and its disciplinary and homogenising effects.

If the tension between the grid’s rationalisation of form and its undoing is fleshed out, even overdetermined, in the exhibition’s entanglements, this tension also structured the architecture of the exhibition itself. When Peter Rose planned the Sert Gallery in 2000, he did so in a way that situated its walls at an oblique angle to the grid that governs Le Corbusier’s design of

the Carpenter Center building. Even so, the Sert Gallery still presents a grid within a grid. With *pedacito de cielo* Balteo Yazbeck's realigns the gallery's interior walls with Le Corbusier's original design (see diagram in Fig. 3). The ensuing discrepancy between the Sert Gallery's exterior and interior walls modifies its exhibition space – i.e. 'white cube' – so that the walls no longer meet at right angles. Here one might recall that it was the urban ideology of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), organised by Le Corbusier, which in part informed Villanueva's urban projects in Venezuela. By thus diverting the regularity of the grid within the grid, Balteo Yazbeck links the physical site of intervention (the Sert Gallery) to the discursive site of the *pedacito de cielo*'s critical effect (the history of the 'grid' in Venezuela), as the legacy, both past and present, of modern architecture is entangled in turn.<sup>33</sup>

It is ultimately, however, by way of Duchamp's *Door* (Figs. 7 and 8) that *pedacito de cielo* engenders a process of continual return to the historical moment of the grid's emergence, to its issues, gaps, and struggles. Through the exhibition's chronologically arranged entanglements, Balteo Yazbeck shows how the grid's form is reinitiated differently and marked by discontinuities in the course of its history. The return to the grid on the part of the artists represented in *pedacito de cielo* always entails a modification, an appropriation of its form towards altogether divergent ends: be they urban, pictorial, typographic, conceptual, collaborative, or performative. To thus understand aesthetic Modernism and the appearance of the grid in the art on display and to insist on it as a discourse is to resituate the question of the grid's autonomy in order to speak to the field of possibility, historical contingency, and social relations that gave rise to its prominence, as well as its eventual elaboration and critique in subsequent generations. Michel Foucault describes the effect of such returns when he writes in 'What is an Author?':

We return to those empty spaces that have been masked by omission or concealed in a false image and misleading plenitude ... It follows naturally that this return, which is a part of the discursive mechanism, constantly introduces modifications and that the return to a text is not a historical supplement that would come to fix itself upon the primary discursivity and redouble it in the form of an ornament which, after all, is not essential. Rather, it is an effective and necessary means of transforming discursive practice.<sup>34</sup>

The exhibition's recursive structure – which differentiates *pedacito de cielo* from Broodthaers's 'Section des Figures' and Gego's *Reticulárea* – was nowhere more striking than in the principal entanglement, which ultimately provides the overriding conceptual framework for this 'intimate museum' (Fig. 16). Here, Otero's *Coloritmo en Movimiento #5* was hung just above two black and white photographs of the east façade of Villanueva's School of Architecture and Urban Studies building (the same Gasparini images were displayed in the entry hall, but here they are presented recently scanned and printed by Balteo Yazbeck). Aligned with the photographs that provide visual information as to the *Policromía*'s original state were two modest sculptures made with glass mosaic tiles. The one to the left of the photographs is a light blue; the one on the right is a much deeper blue. In their distribution, the tiles seemed to mimic Caracas's border as represented in a geographic map's aerial view.

But there is something 'fishy' about these two mosaic sculptures, to again take up one of Balteo Yazbeck's terms. Collected from the grounds in front of the School, the two sculptures were made from tiles that have become



**Fig. 13.** Installation detail. Above and below left: Rolando Peña, *The Oil Project*, 1979, two colour photographs from vintage slides. Below right: Alejandro Otero, *Aguja Solar* (*Solar Needle*), 1982, civic sculpture, b&w photograph by Ricardo Armas. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: José Falconi. (Courtesy: the artist and José Falconi.)

27. 'Reticular practice' is used by Luis Pérez Oramas in his 'Gego, Residual Reticulárea and Involuntary Modernism: Shadow, Traces and Site', in Mari Carmen Ramírez (ed), *Questioning the Line: Gego in Context* (Museum of Fine Arts: Houston, 2003), pp. 84–115.

28. In total, *Reticulárea* would eventually be reconfigured and reinstalled in at least ten different exhibition installations before settling in its permanent home at the Galería de Arte Nacional in Caracas in 1980. For a discussion of the work's various components and multiple iterations, see Mónica Amor, 'Another Geometry: Gego's *Reticulárea*, 1969–1977', *October*, no. 113, Summer 2005, pp. 101–26.

29. For a discussion of Gego's geometry based on doing from which this paragraph in part derives, see my 'Gego's Performative Geometry', in Nadja Rottner and Peter Weibel (eds), *Thinking the Line: Gego* (Hatje Cantz Verlag: Ostfildern-Ruit, 2006).

30. In terms of contemporary curatorial strategies for the exhibition of art from Latin America, I would like to emphasise the difference between what Balteo Yazbeck calls an 'entanglement' and the model of 'constellation' put forth by Mari Carmen Ramírez in *Inverted Utopias*.



**Fig. 14.** General view of the installation. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: José Falconi. (Courtesy: the artist and José Falconi.)



**Fig. 15.** Installation detail. Antonieta Sosa, *Sloth*, Second part of the performance *From the Body into the Void*, 1985, reconstruction no. 3, 2007–2008. Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), 2008. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

31. Plan Caracas was a government-sponsored attempt to consolidate the infrastructure of the urban shantytowns. Only two projects were completed: La Vega and Los Manolos. In *pedacito de cielo*, these two projects are represented by the scanned reproduction of the projects' brochure pages (designed by Álvaro Sotillo), which are here glued directly to the wall.

32. This action formed the second part of Sosa's performance *Del cuerpo al vacío* (*From the Body into the Void*) (1985).

33. Although it is outside the purview of this essay, it is worth mentioning that at the time of its

dislodged from Otero's *Policromía*, which has fallen into a state of disrepair, a ruin of its prior state. By collecting these fragments and using them as the material basis for this work, Balteo Yazbeck's sculpture performs a double movement: he recuperates the fragments as a way to redeem this past for the present, at the same time that, as ruins, the work speaks to failed utopia. It is through such constitutive ambivalence that this '*sui generis* museum' enacts a history of modernity's entanglements, of the promises made and of the failures that ensue.<sup>35</sup>

In an account of the works borrowed from other collections and their subsequent entanglement in *pedacito de cielo*, one recent reviewer asked, 'where was Balteo's personal vision in all of this?'<sup>36</sup> But to go in search of such a 'personal vision' is to confuse Balteo Yazbeck's troubling of the notion of authorship with his particular status as an individual — at times 'nostalgic'





**Fig. 16.** Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *Entanglement of several artworks by others*, 2008. The 'entanglement' includes: (1) Alejandro Otero, *Coloritmo en Movimiento #5*, 1957, synthetic paint on wood, Plexiglas, metal bolts. Collection Gonzalo Parodi; (2) Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, *pedacito de cielo*, 1956–1998, recovered glass mosaic tiles and LED lamps in the corresponding blue tone; (3) Paolo Gasparini, b&w photograph of Carlos Raúl Villanueva, east façade of the School of Architecture and Urban Studies building, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1956. Black sky: reproduction from signed vintage copy. White sky: reproduction from overexposed unstable negative; (4) Miguel Arroyo, *Slatted Platform-Bench for A. Boulton*, 1956, lacquered wood, manufactured by Carpintería Colectiva, Caracas. Courtesy Henrique Faría Fine Art, New York; (5) *Shadow Sub-Entanglement*, 2008, Arroyo 1956/Otero 1957, wooden base cut at the measurement of the shadow projected by the bench in relation to the *Coloritmo*. Photo: Beatriz Yabur. (Courtesy: the artist.)

– subject.<sup>37</sup> *pedacito de cielo* forgoes the subjective attachment by which an author is conventionally tethered to an individual project or concept. Not unlike the manner in which Broodthaers played the museum director, curator, and publicist, so too Balteo Yazbeck performed multiple functions: from artist to exhibition designer, from curator to collector, and even conservator. Take, for example, his 'future entanglement', which mandated that the current owner of Gego's *Dibujo Sin Papel N.10 (Drawing Without Paper)* (1985) restore the work to its original condition.<sup>38</sup>

founding, the colonial centre of Caracas was similarly based on the grid.

34. Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in Donald F. Bouchard (ed), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1977), p. 135.



35. These fragments engage a more explicitly allegorical mode of production, articulating a paradox structural to Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory: 'an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity'. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (Verso: London and New York 1998 [c. 1928]), p. 223.

36. See Robin Greeley, 'Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck', *ArtNexus*, no. 69, 2008, pp. 112–13.

37. In the last note on page 2 of the errata, Balteo Yazbeck, in account of his friends' response to his mosaic sculptures, writes, 'Self-exiled individuals have a tendency to become sentimental and even nostalgic'.

38. This 'mandate' is never explicitly stated in the exhibition, but is suggested in the photographs showing *Dibujo Sin Papel N.10's* failed restoration, which distorted the work's original form.

39. Michel Foucault, *What Is an Author?*, p. 137.

40. José Falconi, '1 warning, 2 questions for the viewer', exh. handout., *pedacito de cielo (1998–2008)* (Sert Gallery/Harvard University: Cambridge, 2008). My emphasis.

41. Hal Foster, 'The Medium Is the Market', *London Review of Books*, 9 October 2008, p. 23.

42. On the one hand, the grid's autonomy is (re)asserted through a compensatory gesture that stridently aims to prove Latin America's inscription within a universal Modernism; on the other hand, the grid (and circles, triangles, and squares) functions as a decorative commodity at art fairs, thereby divested of its modern utopian aspirations.

43. I am referring to the images by Paolo Gasparini in the entry hall and the images of Plan Caracas, respectively.

44. *pedacito de cielo* is thus to be distinguished from a genealogy of installation practices that focus exclusively on art's commodity status or a critique of the institution. It is also differs from the work of contemporary artists such as Fred Wilson who expose historical repressions as a way of making institutional codes visible.

In alignment with the exhibition's recursive structure, Balteo Yazbeck's point of departure (what is mistakenly described as 'personal vision') is more precisely what Foucault describes as the 'author function'. The author function does not designate an individual authorial subject per se, but rather assesses how a subject's position intervenes 'in discourse, and its system of dependencies'.<sup>39</sup> At the level of artistic strategy, Balteo Yazbeck works within such a system of dependencies – i.e. the institutional categories on which the art world's professional distinctions depend, from artist to collector – and consequently upsets the power relations between them. He self-consciously, if ironically, takes into account his own position in relation to other positions and the power structures that delimit those positions. As the errata affirm, 'The artist/curator shamelessly included all of his "art" collection and documents in the show next to other important artworks from really important collections' (three-fourths of the objects on view were his own). And, 'The artist/curator, just like any government, keeps exploiting images of poor people for his own purposes'. Curator José Falconi's text also concedes that Balteo Yazbeck acts as 'curator and artist'.<sup>40</sup> Taken to its most absurd but nevertheless logical conclusion, if a collector was to purchase *pedacito de cielo* he or she would be required to purchase other collectors' work, thereby undoing the critical and conceptual underpinnings of Balteo Yazbeck's exhibition.

By way of a conclusion, then, another level of entanglement might be usefully evoked – one much more indicative of contemporary art and a situation in which, as Hal Foster recently noted, 'museum directors and curators behave as servants of a patron class first and custodians of collective patrimony [and memory] second'.<sup>41</sup> The point hardly needs to be made that when it comes to geometric abstraction in Latin America the majority of exhibitions named at the outset of this essay derive precisely from the collections of the patron class, as do some of the works entangled within *pedacito de cielo*. In this way, *pedacito de cielo* necessarily wrestles with contemporary issues and stakes: *pedacito de cielo* may 'represent' Venezuelan modernisation's conflicted past, but it must also be read against the backdrop of the present institutionalisation of geometric abstraction from Venezuela and Latin America more generally. What differentiates Balteo Yazbeck's position, as *pedacito de cielo* demonstrates, is his willingness to open geometric abstraction to its outside: to a field of historical contingencies as evinced in the ruins of the state's utopian programs, and in so doing to *insist* on introducing a historical framework for the art on display in a contemporary context otherwise intent on escaping it.<sup>42</sup> Alongside 'artworks from really important collections', *pedacito de cielo* presented a series of objects that one would more properly designate as 'archival', including documentary photographs and government brochures. What is more, these were hardly presented in pristine form: instead they were printed from 'unstable negatives' that produced bubble-like effects on the photographic surface, or were distorted through erratically functioning scanners, resulting in coloured blocks and striations on the image reproductions.<sup>43</sup> It is through an attention to a shifting cultural and political terrain that Balteo Yazbeck's 'museum' did not express, represent, imitate, or even champion the history of geometric abstraction in Venezuela.<sup>44</sup> In presenting the history of geometric abstraction in Venezuela as a site of interpretation and contestation, *pedacito de cielo's* stake was, instead, to propose how a museum, even a fishy one, as a specific artistic strategy in the present, might be put to critical use.