100 YEARS OF AUTONOMY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Contemporary Latin American literary criticism often alludes to the first half of the twentieth century as a foil for its diagnoses: as the moment in which the autonomy of art was taken for granted; as a situation in which art still possessed a critical power; as a conjuncture in which literature expresses the ambitions of modernization. As the contributions to this special issue of *FORMA* demonstrate in compelling detail, if we more explicitly engage with the period in question, a richer picture of these dynamics and of unexpected contradictions can be drawn.

In February 1922, an energetic and iconoclastic group of Brazilian artists organized the *Semana de Arte Moderna*. The artists involved in this week-long art exhibition—including, among others, the painters Anita Malfatti and Emiliano Di Calvacanti and the poets Oswald de Andrade and Mário de Andrade—stridently rejected the formalism that dominated the Academia de Letras, turning for inspiration instead to both the European avant-gardes and popular and indigenous cultural forms in Brazil. For literary critics, the *Semana de Arte Moderna* represents not only the foundational moment of a specific artistic movement—namely, Brazilian *modernismo*—but also as a pivotal step in the formation of a modern aesthetic attuned to the specific realities of Brazil. Indeed, we could say that Brazilian *modernismo* presents us with the most self-conscious articulation of a dominant tendency in Latin American art and literature at the time, namely, the effort to assert autonomy from Europe through its engagement with the European art scene, to beat the European avant-gardes at their own game, so to speak, by formulating a local primitivism that could challenge their imported primitivism. In this way, Brazilian *modernismo* operates with a conception of autonomy as *cultural autonomy*, and, as we will see, this orientation would become closely linked to a specific form of modernization in the twentieth century. In his 1933 preface to *Serafim Ponte Grande* (1928), Oswald de Andrade echoes this notion of autonomy when he suggests that the *modernistas* imagined that "the rise in the price of coffee," which had spurred the Brazilian economy in the early twentieth century, "would place the literature of the semi-colonial *nouveau riche* alongside the

costly imperialist Surrealisms?"[1]

But Oswald also begins to articulate a different account of his artistic activity when he describes the "anarchism of his formation,"[2] that is, the satirical attitude toward the bourgeoisie that he develops while travelling through Europe with the likes of Blaise Cendrars and Jean Cocteau. In this light, *modernismo* appears not as the vanguard of the peripheral nation in the process of "catching up" with the core but as the avant-garde rejection of the bourgeois separation of art and life. But Oswald de Andrade, the most self-critical artist in the movement,[3] also calls into question this familiar conception of the avant-garde negation of artistic autonomy when he draws attention to Brazil's "semi-colonial" or peripheral status. Indeed, Oswald reduces his self-described "anarchism" to the "enlightened stupidity of the semi-colony."[4] If a genuine Surrealism depends on "costly" imperialism, then peripheral *modernismo* feeds on the illusion that it can play the same avant-garde game. Oswald de Andrade suggests that this illusion foundered on the inherently unstable nature of the export paradigm. Completed in 1928, the eve of the stock market crash that would reveal the definitive limits of Brazil's coffee economy, *Serafim Ponte Grande* constitutes in Oswald's eyes an "obituary for the bourgeoisie. Epitaph for what I was."[5] In this way, Oswald also anticipates the skeptical attitude towards artistic autonomy that has recently become predominant in light of the collapse of developmentalist modernization.

A remarkably rich document, the preface to *Serafim Ponte Grande* outlines a number of approaches to the question of autonomy: seeing art as the expression of cultural independence; linking aesthetic autonomy to the process of modernization; attending to the sociological conditions for autonomous artistic institutions and activity; and rejecting autonomy through provocative avant-garde acts. Oswald de Andrade's preface, that is, presents in somewhat inchoate form a series of positions on autonomy that would become more clearly defined in subsequent decades. For critics interested in the question of autonomy, the *modernista* moment should thus stand out since it seems to condense in a single, heady moment different stages in the twentieth-century history of literary and cultural production in Latin America.

At the same time, we can also identify another account of autonomy that must be distinguished from both the affirmation of Latin America's cultural independence and the sociological focus on the bourgeois conditions, or lack thereof, for modernist art. In a series of articles, some of which have been translated for this special issue of *FORMA*, the Peruvian Marxist and critic José Carlos Mariátegui describes an artistic tendency he calls "pure nonsense" [*disparate puro*]. Mariátegui perhaps would have associated the "anarchism" of Oswald de Andrade's literary works with this pure nonsense, and indeed he claims, in words that echo Oswald's language above, that pure nonsense "signs the death certificate of the bourgeois absolute."[6] Mariátegui suggestively, al-

beit briefly, elaborates this notion of pure nonsense in a piece written about the Peruvian Martín Adán, an avant-garde poet firmly rooted in the classical tradition. In a "romantic, revolutionary epoch," Mariátegui writes, "the formal tradition exists only as an inert set of dry, dead units."[7] In working through the classical tradition, Adán puts on display the "dissolution" of the old order, but this process of dissolution "cannot remove itself from the ascent of the terms, symbols, and concepts of the new order."[8] Pure nonsense, in other words, bears an essential relation to crisis, but it does not merely reflect breakdown in a passive manner since it indicates the promise of a new meaning.

Mariátegui also touches on the idea of pure nonsense in his discussion of Surrealism in another essay translated for this issue. There, he writes: "The Surrealists only exercise their right to nonsense, to absolute subjectivism, in art; in everything else, they behave sensibly, and this is another thing that differentiates them from the dramatic spectrum of precedents, revolutionary or romantic, in the history of literature."[9] As we see in this quote, Mariátegui's central point in "Taking Stock of Surrealism," a review of the movement on the occasion of Breton's second manifesto, is that the core of Surrealism lies not in gratuitous provocation but in "the difficult, arduous search for a discipline,"[10] a demanding commitment to its own principles, a commitment, in other words, to its autonomy. For Mariátegui, this sense of commitment is essential to Surrealism's relation to politics: "Rather than release a program of Surrealist politics, it accepts and subscribes to the program of the concrete, present revolution: the Marxist program of proletarian revolution."[11] Mariátegui thus sees no contradiction between, at least in the case of mature Surrealism, the pure nonsense of avant-garde art and political commitment. He nicely sums up the position of Surrealism in the following way: "Autonomy of art, yes; but not the closure of art."[12] Surrealism rejects the formalism of *l'art pour l'art*, but this refusal does not entail the negation of autonomy per se.

We find a similar formulation in Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy* (2019), a work that has been a major inspiration for this special issue of *FORMA*. Rejecting the familiar equation of autonomy and aestheticism, Brown argues that autonomy is not a matter of "metaphysical independence from external circumstance." Rather, it "has to do with the fact that precisely those external circumstances are actively taken up by us in ways that are irreducibly normative."[13] Autonomy thus can neither be reduced to given social conditions nor construed as a private retreat from the world. Understood as the "social ontology of the work of art," to evoke the subtitle of Brown's book, autonomy refers to the process by which the artwork expresses its specific, socially-shareable meaning and compels conviction by confronting its given conditions and suspending their determining force. Brown is principally concerned to distinguish this conception of aesthetic autonomy from its greatest contemporary threat, namely, the commodity. It is a difference, he explains, between,

on the one hand, the artwork, "an object whose use (or purpose or meaning) is normatively inscribed in the object itself—a meaning that is universal, in Hegel's terms simply *allgemeine*, available for everyone and not therefore a private matter—and," on the other hand, the commodity, "an object whose use is a matter of indifference from one standpoint and a matter of possibly intense but necessarily private concern from another."[14]

In the essays that have been translated for this issue, Mariátegui does not address the relationship of art to the commodity, but he, like Brown, wants to suggest that autonomy does not close the artwork off from the world. Rather, autonomy is precisely the condition for the work's openness, for its ability to normatively inscribe a meaning that is available for everyone, for its ability to actively take up the exigencies of its own historical context (and our own) in ways that grip us. The refusal of autonomy, by contrast, brings about the closure of art because it denies the very condition for its meaningfulness. Pure nonsense confronts the dissolution of meaning in the bourgeois social order but it also makes that very dissolution meaningful by pointing beyond the crisis. In short, unlike the accounts that conceive of autonomy as the artistic counterpart to the achievement of cultural independence or that prioritize the social determination of art, Mariátegui advances a surprising defense of the political valence of artistic autonomy for a historical situation beset by innumerable crises.

One hundred years after the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, we find ourselves again in a crisis of the bourgeois order, perhaps its terminal crisis. Looking back at the works and reflections of artists and intellectuals of this era, we discover affinities with our own moment, but these resonances may also unsettle some of our familiar assumptions about the meaning of the avant-garde, about the political character of autonomy, about the relationship between art and peripheral situations. In various ways, the contributions to this special issue of *FORMA* explore how the autonomy of Latin American art in the first half of the twentieth century makes it, to recall Mariátegui once again, open—compelling and relevant—to its situation and to our own.

In "Anthropophagia and those Twenties in Brazil: Good Old Days or Bad New Ones?," Bruna Della Torre revisits Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropófago" (1928) in light of the contested legacy of *modernismo* and the volatile political situation in contemporary Brazil. By recognizing Anthropophagia as an "ism"—a collective project—and the political-artistic significance of the manifesto genre in its global context, Della Torre persuasively demonstrates how Oswald's Anthropophagia articulates, at the level of form and content, a trenchant critique of imperialism without lapsing into the sort of nationalism that almost invariably assumes xenophobic forms today.

Pavel Andrade offers in "The Prolific Roads of Reedification: Literature, Architecture, and Autonomy in Post-Revolutionary Mexico" a fundamental

re-reading of the key oppositions defining the literary field in post-Revolution Mexico: cosmopolitanism, nationalism, developmentalist, proletarian. Drawing on recent theories of autonomy and form and recasting Mexican literary debates in light of the history of functionalist architecture, Andrade traces a crucial distinction between autonomy as the repudiation of state power and autonomy as the work's internal coherence.

My essay, "The 'Go-for-Broke Game of History:' Modernist Photography in Mexico," examines the remarkably rich photographic work produced in Mexico by Edward Weston, Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Paul Strand. Whereas traditional accounts reduce the modernist conception of autonomy and objectivity to a notion of medium-specificity, I argue that what is fundamentally at stake in this linking of autonomy and objectivity is a commitment to the inherently social nature of meaning and intentionality. These photographers assert this sort of autonomy to produce compelling critiques of the ironies of post-Revolution Mexico and the alienation of our social capacities.

In "Borges as Realist," Neil Larsen elaborates a provocative interpretation of Jorge Luis Borges, running against the current of virtually all of the existent criticism. Through a detailed reconstruction of the story "Funes, el memorioso," Larsen uncovers a surprising process in Borges's work whereby a hyper-realist strand—typically concerned with the local or the "criollo"—is actually made possible by the story's fantastical or supernatural dimension. Drawing on Roberto Schwarz's seminal reading of Machado de Assis, Larsen suggestively elaborates the crucial insight that realism does not involve a direct correspondence of particular with reality but rather depends on autonomy, on the mediation of the whole of the work.

Gabriel dos Santos Lima and Jorge Manzi Cembrano offer a systematic reconstruction of the critical reflections on autonomy in mid-twentieth century Latin America in "The Two-Step Formation Model of Ángel Rama and Antonio Candido: Late Modernism and Aesthetic Autonomy." Lima and Manzi demonstrate how Candido's and Rama's powerful conception of literary autonomy rested on the modernization projects that flourished in the mid-twentieth century but collapsed in subsequent decades. Against the current trend in criticism today to reject the commitment to autonomy in light of this negative diagnosis of modernization, the authors argue that we can recover a conception of autonomy that gives expression to the dissonance and contradictions of these historical processes.

When Was Autonomy?

It is as if the question of aesthetic or literary autonomy in this period of Latin American literary and art history resembles a source of light. It always illuminates something else—turn-of-the century *modernismo*, mid-century

New Narrative, contemporary literature—without itself becoming the focus of attention. To conceptualize the social position of art in other historical moments by way of contrast, we casually refer to the avant-garde rejection of autonomy or the high modernist preoccupation with internal coherence. But we should be skeptical about this gesture. At a minimum, we cannot assume that modernism and the avant-garde in Latin America have the same meaning often attributed to them in Europe and the United States because the distinction between these artistic tendencies—however coherent it might be—tends to fade in Latin America. The Mexican *estridentistas* exhibit an unmistakable avant-garde orientation, but Brazilian *modernismo* cannot adequately be described as either modernist or avant-garde in the traditional sense. In the next section, I will elaborate on some suggestions for thinking about aesthetic autonomy in relation to modernism and the avant-gardes in Latin America, but this section will show how we can generate relevant questions for this special issue if we briefly overview with a critical eye how critics have addressed the question of aesthetic autonomy for earlier and later historical periods.

Critics often point to the *modernismo* of Rubén Darío, among others, as marking a crucial development in which the direction of literary influence is reversed, moving from the Americas to Europe, not vice versa. The significance of Darío's *modernismo* thus lies in the achievement of a form of cultural autonomy or independence from the lingering effects of Spanish colonial domination.[15] In *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina* (1989), Julio Ramos highlights a different aspect of turn-of-the-century *modernismo*, namely, its autonomy with respect to the market. The market creates the possibility for professional writers to live off their own writing, rather than as representatives of the political authority of the state, but in Latin America the "*uneven* character of modernization, autonomization, and the very professionalization that led to the emergence of a Latin American literary subject" results in a "discursive heterogeneity" that Ramos finds on display most strikingly in José Martí's poems and journalistic *crónicas*.[16] That is, Ramos argues that the autonomization of the literary field in turn-of-the-century Latin American literature remains incomplete. Rather than become the source of its own value, as presumably is the case in European *l'art pour l'art*, literature must contend and compete with political ideologies and the demands of a mass discourse emerging in journalism. By insisting on the incomplete autonomization of the literary field, Ramos presents a remarkably rich account of the social conditions of turn-of-the-century literature, but this conception of autonomy presupposes a notion of metaphysical independence from the world, when what is at stake in autonomy is precisely the way that the artwork actively and meaningfully incorporates its given conditions. Nevertheless, Ramos's work urges us to examine the relationship that Latin American modernism adopts towards its predecessor—i.e., *modernismo*—and how that relationship would

assume a specific form relative to standard histories in Europe and the US.

If Latin American literary criticism holds that the autonomization of the literary field remained uneven at the turn of the twentieth century, presumably its full achievement coincided with the development of the mid-century New Narrative. In their contribution to this issue, Lima and Manzi articulate an insightful account of how this process of autonomization was theorized jointly by two of Latin America's most impactful literary critics: Antonio Candido and Ángel Rama. Starting in the late 1950s, contemporaneous with the Latin American New Narrative and on the basis of previous literary achievements, Candido and Rama formulate what Lima and Manzi call a "two-step" process of literary formation: in the first (sociological or institutional) step, a literary system composed of writers, readers, and a common language is established, "allowing the configuration of a continuity (accumulation or internal causality) where beforehand there were only dualities and [the] oscillating poles"[17] of cosmopolitanism and localism; in the second (formal or aesthetic) step, the modernist pursuit of internal literary coherence projects—or, we might say, compensates for the lack of—the degree of social integration that modernization projects promised to generate.[18] As Lima and Manzi recognize, the ambitions of this conception of literary formation and autonomy appear illusory in the present, in light of the collapse of modernization in the late twentieth century. But whereas contemporary criticism tends to throw out the baby of autonomy with the bathwater of modernization, Lima and Manzi propose that we reconceive autonomy, moving away from "the balanced and conciliatory element" implicit in Candido's and Rama's accounts and instead see it as a "formal model capable—at least during the cycle of democratic national development—of containing dualist struggles which would become increasingly lacerating."[19] If we can now disentangle literary autonomy and mid-century modernization, then perhaps we can—and this is the suggestion of this issue—also articulate an account of aesthetic autonomy's critical dimension in Latin America for the period preceding the apparently triumphant phase of modernization.

Although the autonomy of a literary system in Latin America could be said to have been achieved in the mid-twentieth century, this condition apparently did not endure, and contemporary Latin American literary criticism tends to agree that literary or artistic specificity has been exhausted. This thesis has been expounded most notably and most explicitly by Josefina Ludmer. For Ludmer, the "post-autonomous" literature of the present "continues to appear as literature," but "it applies to literature a drastic operation of emptying-out."[20] As Emilio Sauri and Eugenio Di Stefano have recognized, Ludmer's characterization of post-autonomous literature recalls accounts of the historical avant-garde's self-critique of art, that is, of the artwork's claim to be an organic whole and of the institutions that support that claim.[21] In the

following section, I will suggest that we ought to reconsider this picture of the avant-garde's relation to autonomy. But, crucially for Ludmer, the post-autonomous critique of literature takes place not in the historical situation of the avant-gardes, in which this autonomy was more or less taken for granted, but in the contemporary context of transnational capitalism and media industries: a context, in other words, in which the artwork has been reduced to a commodity. If the principal threat to autonomy today is to be found in the market, not state power or the cultural weight of the metropole, then autonomy may appear historically outdated. And yet, according to a strand of criticism that runs counter to this position in Latin American literary studies, the ongoing assertion of autonomy may not only remain possible today, it may now embody a different sort of political significance. In *The Vanishing Frame* (2018), Di Stefano agrees that in the present "the commodification of art is regarded as a given," but whereas Ludmer takes this to mean that art has therefore lost its critical dimension, Di Stefano insists that the "assertion of the frame"—the assertion of the irreducibility of the artwork to what is outside it, of the irrelevance of its meaning to any reader's specific experience of it—can be seen now as "making a certain kind of politics imaginable," namely, an anti-capitalist politics based on the refusal to subordinate the formal organization of the work to the demands of anonymous market forces.[22] The question of the commodification of literature, indeed, is qualitatively different today than it was in the early twentieth-century, but perhaps for that very reason we can find manifestations of aesthetic autonomy in that moment that propel the contemporary drive to conceive of art as always more-than-a-commodity.

Autonomy Then, Today

The definitive work on autonomy in Brazilian *modernismo* and the Latin American *vanguardias* has yet to be written. But this topic ought to receive more attention in Latin Americanist criticism because, as I have suggested above, the artists and intellectuals involved were acutely aware of the social situation of art and because the resonance of these social conditions—namely, the peripheral situation and chronic crisis—with our own may bring into focus or reframe our current conjuncture. To begin to address the specific valences of autonomy for Latin American writers and artists in the first half of the twentieth century, it seems we must attend to the difference between the avant-garde and modernism. Indeed, the difference between the former and the latter could be said to boil down to their respective stances on autonomy. In his indispensable *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger argues that the activities of the avant-garde were directed, most radically in Dadaism, at "the liquidation of art as an activity that is split off from the praxis of life."[23] The avant-gardes thus exhibited hostility towards the institutions of art, but

at the level of art itself, this critique was also advanced through "the refusal to provide meaning," that is, through the rejection of the organic work in which "the parts can be understood only through the whole, the whole only through the parts."[24] Insofar as the "parts 'emancipate' themselves from a superordinate whole" as in montage, this refusal "is experienced as shock by the recipient," a "stimulus" designed "to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis."[25] The avant-garde gesture thus could not be an autonomous work because it must be completed by the reader or beholder.

Do *las vanguardias latinoamericanas* enact this avant-garde negation of autonomy? Yes and no. Insofar as the negation, in Bürger's theory, is directed not only at the "work" character of the art but also at its institutionalization, we might say that in Latin America we have the former but not the latter. Vicky Unruh, for instance, notes in her foundational work *Latin American Vanguards* (1994) that avant-garde writers and artists in the region, confronting the absence of strong national traditions and institutions, often worked actively to build, not destroy.[26] To evoke just one example, when the Argentine *ultraístas* were considering a name for their magazine in 1924, they conspicuously selected, and without irony, perhaps the nation's most central popular figure: José Hernández's gaucho Martín Fierro. In so doing, the *martinfierristas* adopted a stance that Beatriz Sarlo calls "avant-garde urban *criollismo*."[27] "The anti-bourgeois tension of the European avant-garde was converted, in Buenos Aires," according to Sarlo, into a cultural nationalism and "into a more moderate opposition to aesthetic philistinism and to the lack of taste of the average bourgeois."[28] If the Argentine example presents a more subdued version of the radical gestures of the European avant-gardes, we might also identify a continuity in the sense that the work must be completed by the beholder: through shock in one case and the formation of a tradition in the other.

Modernism, by contrast, tends to be seen as endorsing a commitment to the "organic" work because of its emphasis on internal coherence. We would be mistaken, however, to infer from this contrast that whereas the avant-gardes seek engagement with the world, the modernist assertion of autonomy expresses the desire for "liberation from the whole world."[29] As Lisa Siraganian has argued in *Modernism's Other Work* (2012), modernist autonomy means "freedom from others ascribing meaning to art objects."[30] As a result, rather than simply disavow politics, modernist autonomy involves a specifically liberal political orientation, a commitment to a space for individual self-determination relative to the state.[31] In short, and very schematically, if the avant-gardes reject the separation of art from social life in order to transform the latter, modernism upholds the autonomy of the artwork (and of the individual) within social life.

Paraphrasing Roberto Schwarz, we might say that these modernist and

avant-garde debates about aesthetic autonomy do not and must apply in Latin America. We could cite numerous examples—including, among many others, Vicente Huidobro, José Carlos Mariátegui, César Vallejo, Alejo Carpentier, Victoria Ocampo, Mexican *estridentismo* and Brazilian *modernismo*—of Latin American artists who attentively followed and took positions on Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. In his influential essay "Las dos vanguardias latinoamericanas" (1973), Ángel Rama opposed this cosmopolitan orientation among Latin American modernists to a national-popular stance that sought to communicate with local audiences and that took its content from popular traditions. From Rama's perspective, which much of Latin Americanist criticism seems to share, the assertion of artistic autonomy comes at the cost of being relevant for the specificity of Latin American social reality. Vicente Huidobro would seem to be the most egregious expression of this cosmopolitan, formalist orientation. Actively collaborating with Cubists and Dadaists and often writing in French, Huidobro might seem completely detached from the urgent demands of the masses and indigenous groups back in Chile. And we might link this cosmopolitan attitude to *creacionismo*, his conception of art as an absolute creation. In his early manifesto "*Non Serviam*" (1914), Huidobro adamantly rejects the classical view of art as an imitation of nature, announcing: "I don't have to be your slave, mother Nature; I will be your master."[32] In subsequent decades, Huidobro would elaborate his *creacionista* philosophy, linking this attitude with accomplishments in engineering and technology, such as the automobile and the airplane. "In our days," he writes, "man has broken the shell of appearances and discovered what was inside," and likewise the poet "must not imitate the aspect of things but rather follow the constructive laws that are its essence and that give it independence."[33] *Creacionista* poetry also asserts its independence from the reader since "the power of the creator … encompasses" the observer "in itself."[34] Independent from nature and from the reader, art would be, in Huidobro's view, a resolutely *absolute* creation. But if it is absolute—that is, not relative to anything else—could it adopt any sort of meaningful stance on the national or international exigencies that shape Latin American reality?

It would seem that Huidobro has taken the modernist commitment to autonomy to its extremes rather than give artistic expression to a specifically Latin American content. In this way, the case of Huidobro perhaps echoes José de Alencar's importation of the nineteenth-century realist novel to Brazil. As Roberto Schwarz shows in his seminal interpretation, Alencar faced a question about the relationship between (European) form and (local) content: "How would those great energizing themes" of the realist novel—"social climbing, the corrupting power of money, the clash between the aristocratic and bourgeois ways of life—which informed the plot or structure of the novel, get "work[ed] out in Brazil," in a country still largely based on slave labor?[35]

Committed to "observable (Brazilian) reality and the accepted (European) model," Alencar "unwittingly replays a central incongruity in Brazilian intellectual life, leaving it unresolved."[36] Alencar's novels are not entirely successful, but, according to Schwarz, the incongruity itself is not the source of their failure. Schwarz does not suggest that Alencar ought to have simply ignored the European model and attended directly to Brazilian reality. Indeed, the incongruity is a constitutive feature of Brazilian reality. Accordingly, the relevant question becomes: does the writer unconsciously reproduce the incongruity or, as in the case of Machado de Assis's mature work, make that disparity into "a constructive principle" of the work?[37] The incongruity between literary form and social presuppositions already contains in Alencar's novels an implicit critique of Brazil's dependency, of the contradictory relation between its slave economy and its participation in a liberal, bourgeois order, but, in order for a literary work to make that incongruity appear successfully and explicitly, it must become a matter of the work's deliberate composition. With regards to Huidobro, we can now reframe our question. Rather than ask if his *creacionista* commitment to autonomy involves a disregard for the specific structure of exigencies defining Latin American reality, we should ask if Huidobro's avant-garde work unconsciously registers those fundamental incongruities or if it actively takes up those given conditions and makes them meaningful insofar as they are incorporated into the structuring principle of the work?

To further develop this question, we should also return to the claim that the modernist commitment to aesthetic autonomy was fundamentally linked to liberalism. As we saw above, some critics have insisted that the commitment to aesthetic autonomy acquires a distinct political valence in the present because the claim that the work's meaning is irreducible to the beholder's experience now entails, instead of a liberal conception of independence from the state, a critique of the demands of the commodity form. But if modernist autonomy was limited by its liberal orientation, we should not assume that this liberalism would look the same in early-twentieth-century Latin America. After all, to draw once again on the invaluable work of Roberto Schwarz, the liberalism that emerged out of nineteenth-century European society was an "ideology well grounded in appearances," but when ideas of individual liberty were systematically contradicted by the realities of slave labor—or brutal inequality, more generally—liberalism becomes an ideology "of the second degree," that is, one that does "not describe reality, not even falsely."[38] Again, the point for Schwarz is not to insist that liberal ideas could simply be ignored. Given Brazil's position in the international division of labor, "they could not be discarded," at the same time that they "could not be put into practice."[39] Rather than "insist on their obvious falsehood," Schwarz suggests, "the critic ought to "observe their dynamics, of which this falsehood was a true component."[40] Moreover, to fully follow these dynamics, we ought to recognize that

the falsehood is also a feature of liberalism's relation to non-peripheral social situations. By tracing the process by which these ideas become "out of place" in the periphery, we can make explicit the inequalities they falsely describe in the core of the capitalist economy. To return to autonomy, we could dismiss the modernist commitment to autonomy superficially on the grounds that its liberal politics do not have a place in Latin American societies, but a Schwarzian critique might attune us to how the modernist concern with autonomy in peripheral situations discloses the self-contradictory character of liberalism.

Vicente Huidobro's *Altazor* (1931) enacts and points beyond the contradictions of liberalism insofar as it revolves around a lacerating experimentation with language itself and thereby confronts the very dissolution of meaning. Although I can only sketch the outlines of such an interpretation here, I would argue that the assertion of autonomy in *Altazor* takes place within the horizon of liberalism, but it brings about the crisis of that horizon through the unraveling of language. Put differently, if liberalism is committed to the irreducibility of meaning to the beholder's experience, *Altazor*, through the composition of the work, pushes this commitment to the point of meaninglessness and thereby indicates a different sort of meaning that might emerge out of the collapse. The beginning of the work thematizes this liberal conception of autonomy insofar as Altazor, the character, soars in the sky, unburdened, we might say, by the weight of the interpretations of others. But as Altazor falls from the sky, this liberal independence collapses with what the poem describes as the death of the era of Christianity. Moreover, as *Altazor* suggests through various references, the context for the fall is not only a spiritual crisis but also a political and social crisis marked by war and revolutions. Altazor feels the exigence of this historical situation—"No hay tiempo que perder," the speaker repeatedly reminds the reader—but Altazor responds to this demand not by subordinating the work to the world but by experimenting with language to find a minimum basis of communication. However, at the conclusion of the poem, in Canto VII, the experimentation produces mere sounds: "Ai aia aia / ia ia ia aia ui."[41] The poem ends with a striking expression of what Mariátegui calls pure nonsense. This nonsense embodies the dissolution of meaning conditioned by the crisis of liberal, bourgeois society, but the literary expression of the nonsense makes it meaningful to the extent that it points toward a new order, or at least toward the need for a new form of social life. Using language consistent with Huidobro's *creacionismo*, we might say that insofar as *Altazor* is *about* meaninglessness—not devoid of meaning itself—this meaninglessness is relative to the absolutely creative poetic work, to the capacity for producing meaning that cannot be exhausted by any specific system of meanings.

Seemingly consistent with Huidobro's *creacionismo*, Grant Kester has argued in a recent book, *The Sovereign Self* (2023), that aesthetic autonomy remains at the core of the avant-garde project. Rejecting the familiar notion

of a radical rupture between Enlightenment aesthetics and the historical avant-gardes, Kester instead finds a common logic, namely, the idea of a sovereign self or an "'internal' cognitive space of artistic creativity [that] is essentially pure and uncorrupt."[42] Taking the argument a step further, Kester also finds the logic of the sovereign self in political vanguardism, identifying the correspondence, for instance, between Latin American neo-avant-gardes and the *foquismo* of Che Guevara. For Kester, this pervasive logic of autonomy needs to be interrogated and critiqued because it involves "treating any force or agency external to the self as either a threat to be repelled or a resource to be consumed" and thus makes "the monological individual" into "the singular origin of all critical insight" and "creative agency."[43] The monological character of autonomy would, accordingly, need to be overcome through the dialogic character of an open artwork and democratic political structures.

Kester's argument ironically seems to rest on the sort of rigid opposition of inner and outer that he wants to undo with his critique of autonomy. Instead, as I have tried to argue in this introduction, it is precisely the commitment to the autonomy of the artwork that overcomes—or at least points toward the possibility of overcoming—these stubborn oppositions. Autonomy does not involve positing a putatively pure inner realm and then imposing its designs on the world. In denying the autonomy of the work, meaning becomes a matter of individual, private experience. In other words, it disappears *as* meaning. By contrast, the autonomous artwork is, to evoke Nicholas Brown once again, "an object whose use (or purpose or meaning) is normatively inscribed in the object itself—a meaning that is universal, in Hegel's terms simply *allgemeine*, available for everyone and not therefore a private matter."[44] Mariátegui, likewise, by distinguishing autonomy from closure, outlines a conception of autonomy that involves neither a liberal, monological individualism nor the subordination to given conditions but rather a way of taking up and making meaningful—hence, shareable—the given conditions of a global capitalist order in crisis. As I suggested above, it is only because of a work's autonomy that it remains open to its time and to us, that it speaks to the social contradictions that were actual in the first half of the twentieth century and that have become, once again, increasingly urgent today.

NOTES

[1] "Quem sabe se a alta do café não ia colocar a literatura nova-rica da semicolônia ao lado dos custosos surrealismos imperialistas?" Oswald de Andrade, *Obras completas de Oswald de Andrade: Serafim Ponte Grande* (São Paulo: Secretaria de Estado da Cultura de São Paulo, 1990), 38.

[2] Oswald de Andrade, *Serafim*, 37.

[3] In discussing the reactions sparked by the centenary of the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, Bruna Della Torre rightly points out that Oswald de Andrade already articulates many of the points that subsequent critics would make of the *modernista* movement.

[4] "O anarquismo da minha formação foi incorporada à estupidez letrada da semicolônia." Oswald de Andrade, *Serafim*, 37.

[5] "Necrológio da burguesia. Epitáfio do que fui." Oswald de Andrade, *Serafim*, 39. Oswald here anticipates a distinction that critics would make between the "heroic" phase of *modernismo* and a more sober, "critical" phase that turned away from artistic experiments toward pressing social problems.

[6] José Carlos Mariátegui, "Defense of Pure Nonsense," in "'Autonomy of Art, Yes; But No the Closure of Art:" José Carlos Mariátegui on Modernism and the Avant-Gardes," *FORMA: A Journal of Latin American Criticism and Theory*, 3.2 (2024): 147.

[7] Mariátegui, "Pure Nonsense,"147.

[8] Mariátegui, "Pure Nonsense," 147.

[9] José Carlos Mariátegui, "Taking Stock of Surrealism," in "'Autonomy of Art, Yes; But No the Closure of Art:" José Carlos Mariátegui on Modernism and the Avant-Gardes," *FORMA: A Journal of Latin American Criticism and Theory*, 3.2 (2024): 143-47.

[10] Mariátegui, "Surrealism," 144.

[11] Mariátegui, "Surrealism," 144.

[12] Mariátegui, "Surrealism," 144.

[13] Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 30.

[14] Brown, *Autonomy*, 6.

[15] See: *Ángel Rama, Rubén Darío y el modernismo* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Biblio-

tecta de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1973).

[16] Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. John D. Blanco (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 70-71.

[17] Gabriel dos Santos Lima and Jorge Manzi Cembrano, "The Two-Step Formation Model of Ángel Rama and Antonio Candido: Late Modernism and Aesthetic Autonomy," *FORMA: A Journal of Latin American Criticism and Theory* 3.2 (2024): 117-39.

[18] Despite what the language of a "two-step" process might suggest, we are not dealing here with a linear evolution in which purely sociological conditions must be established before autonomous literary works can be produced. Literary works themselves contribute to the development of the first step, and ongoing developments in the literary system continue to condition artistic products.

[19] Lima and Manzi, "Two-Step," 130.

[20] Josefina Ludmer, *Aquí América latina: Una especulación* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2010), 150

[21] Eugenio Di Stefano and Emilio Sauri, "Making it Visible: Latin Americanist Criticism, Literature, and the Question of Exploitation Today," *nonsite.org* 13 (2014).

[22] Eugenio Claudio Di Stefano, *The Vanishing Frame: Latin American Culture and Theory in the Postdicatorial Era* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 19.

[23] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 56.

[24] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 79-80.

[25] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80.

[26] See: Vicky Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

[27] Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, trans. John King (London: Verso Books, 1993), 112.

[28] Sarlo, *Borges*, 98.

[29] Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

[30] Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work*, 4.

[31] For Siraganian, the postmodernist critique of aesthetic autonomy thus closely parallels the communitarian critique of liberalism when it holds that "meaning must heteronomously include readers—and readers' bodies—making meaning." See: Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work*, 17.

[32] "Non serviam. No he de ser tu esclavo, madre Natura; seré tu amo." Vicente Huidobro, *Vicente Huidobro: Poesía y poética (1911-1948)*, ed. René de Costa (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1996), 41.

[33] "El hombre de nuestros días ha roto la cáscara de las apariencias y ha descubierto lo que había dentro. La poesía no debe imitar el aspecto de las cosas sino seguir las leyes constructivas que son su esencia y que le dan la independencia propia de todo lo que es." Huidobro, *Vicente Huidobro*, 93.

[34] "El arte nos interesa más la potencia del creador que la del observador. Y, por lo demás, la primera encierra en sí misma, y en mayor grado, a la segunda." Huidobro, *Vicente Huidobro*, 94.

[35] Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, trans. John Gledson (London: Verso Books, 1992), 43.

[36] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 46.

[37] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 42.

[38] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 23.

[39] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 28.

[40] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 28.

[41] Vicente Huidobro, *Altazor, or A Voyage in a Parachute: Poem in VII Cantos* (1919), trans. Eliot Weinberger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 148.

[42] Grant Kester, *The Sovereign Self: From the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023): 4.

[43] Grant Kester, *The Sovereign Self*, 24.

[44] Brown, *Autonomy*, 6.