

A Marxist Alternative to Marxist Art History: Latin America's Social Theory of Art

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In the history of art history, Marxism's most significant contribution—or at least its most conspicuous—has been ideological analysis. Pioneered in the mid-twentieth century by Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser and further developed by Nicos Hadjinicolaou in the early 1970s, ideological analysis links stylistic developments with the worldviews and economic interests of specific social classes.¹ It positions the artwork as a symbolic site of class struggle, oftentimes plumbing art's role as a device for class domination. In Hadjinicolaou's formulation—arguably the boldest—the very notion of style is superseded by that of “visual ideology” (*idéologie imagée*), which he defines as “a specific combination of the formal and thematic elements through which people express the way they relate their lives to the conditions of their existence, a combination which constitutes a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class.”²

Beginning in the late 1970s, a group of Latin American critics and scholars, also influenced by Marx, offered an alternative approach: the so-called “social theory of art” (*teoría social del arte*). Importantly, this endeavor did not entail a complete rejection of ideological analysis. It rather purported to serve as a corrective to what its proponents regarded as a partial, and therefore insufficient, understanding of Marx's legacy. Ideological analysis was firmly rooted in Marx's famous characterization of art—alongside law, religion, and whatever might fall under the rubric of “culture”—as part of a society's superstructure: both the symbolic reflection and the apparatus allowing for the reproduction of a particular economic structure or mode of production. In attending primarily to this aspect, however, Marxist art historians had arguably neglected the fact that the artwork itself is an object—one that is produced, circulated, and consumed in the same manner as other material goods. As will be

¹ See, for example: Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and its Social Background* (London: Kegan Paul, 1948); Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951); and Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, trans. Louise Asmal (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

² Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, 95–96.



1. Cover of Rita Eder and Mirko Lauer, eds., *Teoría social del arte. Bibliografía comentada*. Photo: University of Chicago Visual Resources Center.

shown in this essay, the social theory of art sought to address this issue by highlighting the role of material determinants in the production of both the work of art and its artistic value. But I should make clear at the outset that the present commentary, from a methodological point of view, will not be as rigorous as I would have wished. While it is fair to say that the social theory of art emerged from a collaborative effort, none of the participating scholars explicitly claimed it in their individual work. Even its primary advocate, the Peruvian poet and art critic Mirko Lauer, favored in his own texts an alternative label—one that, as will be seen later, cannot be easily translated into English.

It was Lauer who most likely introduced the term when, in 1981, he organized a seminar in Lima called “The Social Theory of Art” that comprised an interdisciplinary group of Peruvian scholars and critics.³ His initiative, however, would eventually spread beyond the borders of Peru. In 1986, along with Mexican art historian Rita Eder, Lauer co-edited an annotated bibliography entitled *The Social Theory of Art* (Fig. 1), which, along with their own contributions, contains entries by Peruvian art critic Juan Acha, Argentine philosopher Néstor García Canclini, and Mexican anthropologist Victoria Novelo, among others. The bibliography includes 242 works, both books and articles, ranging from several classics of Marxist

³ On this event, see: Gustavo Buntinx, *E.P.S Huayco: Documentos* (Lima: Centro Cultural de España, 2005), 98, note 151.

literature to the more recent production of scholars, artists, and critics influenced by Western Marxism, such as John Berger, Pierre Bourdieu, T.J. Clark, Thomas Crow, Nicos Hadjinicolaou (himself the author of several entries), and the French Sociological Art Collective.⁴ At the beginning of the introduction, Lauer and Eder define the social theory of art as “a generic name for all of those methodological approaches that focus on the socio-historical aspects of plastic creation.”⁵ They cast it as an intellectual tradition that encompasses the authors collected in the bibliography as well as the book’s contributors. Here, Lauer and Eder offer what can be considered a genealogy of their own project. Yet it seems unlikely that all of the book’s contributors subscribed to that narrative; as noted earlier, none utilize the label in their own work. In this regard, Mijail Mitrovic rightly observes that “in the end, its authors shared a set of premises that were perhaps too abstract and too general—premises that each one, according to their particular interests, elaborated as a distinctly individual program.”⁶

A more sensible approach, then, might be to focus on individual authors rather than on a collective, the very existence of which is open to debate. Even so, however ill-defined it might be, the label has gained currency in recent years, as scholarly interest in theories developed outside of the North Atlantic has grown. More importantly, many of the participants in both the 1981 seminar and the 1986 annotated bibliography shared, if not a full research program, at least some core views on Marx, Marxist art history, and the perspectives that a materialist analysis of art could open up. It is those views that I will discuss in what follows. Accordingly, my reconstruction will center on the arguments advanced by Lauer and García Canclini, as they are the ones, I believe, who most forcefully defended the project in terms of Marxian exegesis, methodology, and practical applications. It must be acknowledged, however, that this constitutes a rather limited sample, which some might perceive as

⁴ As might be evident, their sources, written in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, and Czech, largely came from Western Europe, the United States, and Latin America. With the sole exception of those from the former Czechoslovakia (Lauer’s birthplace), no Eastern European sources were addressed. This might come as a surprise given Hadjinicolaou’s involvement and his familiarity with East German art historical literature. In their introduction, Eder and Lauer outline their efforts to collect resources from both institutional and private libraries and bemoan the lack of materials from the “Third World” beyond Latin America (especially Africa and Asia), noting the difficulty of “horizontal” communication between underdeveloped countries, or what we might now call “south-south” networks.

⁵ Rita Eder and Mirko Lauer, “Introducción,” in Rita Eder and Mirko Lauer, eds., *Teoría social del arte. Bibliografía comentada* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986), 7. All translations are my own.

⁶ Mijail Mitrovic, “De la obra al objeto plástico. Pasajes de una crítica marxista del arte en el Perú,” in Omar Cavero, ed., *El poder de las preguntas. Ensayos desde Marx sobre el Perú y el mundo contemporáneo* (Lima: Universidad de Ciencias y Humanidades, 2019), 569. While the present article was in press, an English-language article by Mitrovic on the social theory of art was published. See Mijail Mitrovic, “Between Two Latin Americanisms: The Social Theory of Art (1975-86),” *e-flux journal* 137 (June 2023), 55-65.

unrepresentative due to the exclusion, for example, of Juan Acha's influential work.⁷ Thus, I should insist that my aim here is not to legitimize a label that can be reasonably contested; rather, it is to explore what is announced in the title of this paper: a Marxist alternative to Marxist art history. I will proceed by first offering an overview of the theoretical foundations of the project (section I), and then turning to analyze it as practiced by García Canclini and Lauer (sections II and III), so as to finally assess its merits and flaws (section IV).

I

The social theory of art, as championed by Lauer and García Canclini, concerns a central theme in Marx's thought that Marxist art historians had arguably overlooked and that Marx himself, for unknown reasons, had failed to account for in his writings on art: the social existence of artworks as material objects. Although it might seem logical to begin with an exploration of what such a concept meant to Marx and how the social theory of art mobilized it, I have chosen for the sake of clarity, to start with one of the project's main corollaries: namely, the rejection of visual analysis as a privileged tool for the study of art.

According to Lauer and García Canclini, art history has traditionally been dominated by a rather fetishistic view of the artwork. They maintain that this view stems from the assumption that the study of art is equivalent to the study of all objects deemed artistic. In accordance with this paradigm, most art historians analyze and interpret the attributes of an artwork, judging its aesthetic value and providing a final verdict on its importance for the history of art. Marxist art historians proceed differently. Hadjinicolaou, for example, challenges the aesthetic ideologies that have shaped art history since its inception as an academic discipline. Moreover, he argues that art history, if conceived of as a scientific endeavor, is not about the artworks themselves *per se*, but about the ideologies they visually embody. Consequently, the focus should be shifted from the artwork to apparently external factors (such as the artist's class origin and class consciousness) to excavate the social values and power structures that the artwork helps to transmit and reproduce.

This redefinition of the subject matter of art history, however, may not be as radical as it seems. Lauer and García Canclini contend that Hadjinicolaou's method ultimately hinges on the premise that work and context—the visual and the social—belong in separate, incommensurable orders. In other words, his model simply establishes correlations between the order of the visual and social phenomena, as if one were a mere reflection of the other. The fundamental problem here lies in a dualist view of reality that sublimates the materiality of the artwork to the extent that the latter can only be studied as an immaterial representation.

⁷ As of late, a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to Acha's notion of "non-objectual art," which he originally presented at the First Latin American Conference on Non-Objectual Art and Urban Art in 1981. Little, however, has been written about the three books that constitute Acha's most substantial contribution to the social theory of art: *El sistema de producción* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979); *El producto artístico y su estructura* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981); and *El arte y su distribución* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1984). To discuss them in greater detail is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

Marx himself bears some responsibility for this view, as it emerges from his decidedly didactic scheme of base and superstructure outlined in the 1859 preface. There, he claims that “the economic structure of society [is] the real foundation on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.”⁸ This superstructure, which also encompasses religion, art, and philosophy, constitutes the realm of ideology. Accordingly, social reality is divided into two planes: the “real” base (i.e., the economic structure) and the forms of social consciousness that facilitate its reproduction. What Marx seems to be describing here is a causal, one-sided relation in which art reflects the more fundamental reality of economy. Art, therefore, exists not in the real realm of economy but rather in that of ideology.

For García Canclini, who discusses this issue thoroughly in his 1979 book, *Symbolic Production*, Marx’s scheme paved the way for “mechanistic distortions” that cast the superstructure as “something that lies *outside* of and comes *after* the relations of production.”⁹ Perhaps in allusion to Hadjinicolaou, he adds:

There exists a way of being a materialist that reproduces the idealist mistake by inverting it: just as [some] aestheticist and culturalist theories autonomized the realm of signs, mechanistic materialism isolates the representation of the real by casting it as deferred reflection—one installed in a space other than that of the structure.¹⁰

Here, he emphasizes that, while eminently symbolic, the artwork does not belong to a special class of objects that only exist as subjective experience. Symbolic objects are also material entities—products of human activity. As García Canclini states, “Not only does art *represent* the relations of production, it *realizes* them.”¹¹

What this entails for the study of art is not a wholesale rejection of Marx but rather a critique of ideological analysis as a paradigm for Marxist art history. In fact, García Canclini argues that Marxist materialism must be radicalized by both paying due attention to the very materiality of the artwork and discarding rigidly schematic understandings of the relationship between base and superstructure. “Art,” he writes, “should not only be explained in connection to the general socioeconomic structure, but in connection to its conditions of production as well.”¹²

Although largely in agreement, Lauer takes his Marxian exegesis a bit further. In his 1982 *Critique of Craft*, he calls attention to the conceptual gap between the Marx who

⁸ Karl Marx, “Preface,” in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 20.

⁹ Néstor García Canclini, *La producción simbólica. Teoría y método en sociología del arte* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1979), 87. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ García Canclini, *La producción simbólica*, 88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73. Emphasis in original.

¹² *Ibid.*, 72. For earlier versions of this argument, see: Néstor García Canclini, *Arte popular y sociedad en América Latina* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1977), 31–54.

undertakes the critique of political economy and the Marx who writes about art. These two authors, as Lauer observes, do not seem to be organically linked. While the former is committed to dismantling a historically constituted category (namely, political economy), the latter “operat[es] from within the category of art as established... remain[ing] anchored in the nineteenth century, in the justifications of a personal and cultural predilection for Greek art.”¹³ If the latter author had followed the lead of the “other” Marx—that is, the author of *Capital*—he might have analyzed art in terms of social relations of production, discussed how art functions within a capitalist economy, or highlighted the artwork’s status as objectified labor.

Of course, Marx’s followers in the fields of aesthetics and art history could have taken on that task; after all, they had all the necessary tools at their disposal. Yet, they largely failed to do so, perhaps because they thought that a Marxist account of art ought to be grounded in what Marx himself had written on the topic. This approach was not altogether wrong. As Lauer observes in a text written with Eder, it allowed Marxist aesthetic theorists and art historians to address new issues, both theoretical and methodological, such as:

The strong connection that exists between artistic practices and their outcomes with the notion of social class, as well as the ensuing realization that artistic practices (i.e., genres and styles) are characteristic of given classes; the significance of extra-aesthetic criteria in judging what is artistic (which entails acknowledging their importance in the very constitution of the artistic); an [increased] understanding of the fundamental role that the artistic plays as a complement to the social.¹⁴

These innovations, however, came at the cost of neglecting two fundamental methodological contributions that Marx makes in *Capital*. The first, and the most general, concerns the necessity of systematically subjecting to critique all “constituted categories,” that is, all those abstractions and generalizations upon which conventional wisdom is founded. Take, for example, the notion of “antiquity,” which in standard accounts encompasses ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Rather than challenging it, Lauer observes, even a professed Marxist art historian such as Arnold Hauser adopted it, thus inadvertently neglecting “the antiquities of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the great kingdoms of Africa, the theocratic empires of the Americas, etc.”¹⁵ These omissions are evidently symptoms of a Western bias, yet Lauer refrains from immediately attributing them to a particular disdain for non-Western cultures and peoples. Instead, he asserts that they make clear that “the categories of description and art criticism employed by Marxist aesthetics did not themselves result from a Marxist way of thinking and researching.”¹⁶ They lacked an empirical basis and did not depart from an examination of concrete, particular realities. As a result, they were little more than “socially

¹³ Mirko Lauer, *Crítica de la artesanía. Plástica y sociedad en los Andes peruanos* (Lima: Desco, 1982), 39.

¹⁴ Rita Eder and Mirko Lauer, “Estudio preliminar”, in Eder and Lauer, eds., *Teoría social del arte*, 25.

¹⁵ Lauer, *Crítica*, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

contextualized” renditions of the old classifications and periodizations.”¹⁷ In this regard, Hauser’s work reveals “an idealist outlook that at all times takes a part for the whole, what is apparent for what is real, and takes social terminology for the Marxist method.”¹⁸

The second of Marx’s contributions that Marxist art scholars failed to build upon is his conceptualization of the object as the most external aspect of a process that determines its value and social meaning. In other words, the key to explaining the meaning of an object lies in its process. As Lauer suggests, this conceit proved barely intelligible for art scholars since it challenged the conventional wisdom about what kind of phenomena are studied when one studies art. To accept it entailed doing away with a “vision of art as *finished product*.”¹⁹ This is all to say that what we call “art” is not a collection of artworks; rather, what constitutes the proper subject of art scholarship is the processes of production, distribution, and consumption that determine the social value of the artwork. The artwork is only art’s most external aspect. Accordingly, art cannot be properly studied by exclusively relying on visual analysis, since an analysis of the artwork’s observable features does not necessarily shed light on the processes by which the artwork came to exist and, more importantly, to signify.

In the two variants examined thus far, the social theory of art seeks to return to Marx in order to overcome the conceptual framework that Marxists (and, to some extent, Marx himself) established for the study of art. The arguments advanced by Lauer and García Canclini are complementary to a great degree: in both cases, the suitability of ideological analysis as the backbone of a Marxist history of art is questioned, and in both cases, the artwork is conceived of not as a mere image or reflection of the economic structure, but as a material object in a Marxist sense—the value and social meaning of which are determined by economic activity and technological development.

The model presented here is not a hermeneutic one. It does not offer criteria that might help unpack the meaning of the artwork as a discrete, individual entity; indeed, it focuses on structural factors that are, by definition, at odds with any notion of individuality—or, at the very least, of individual intentionality. The meaning of art, as this theory would have it, lies in its material causes. Accordingly, the artwork is cast as a generic entity: neither its internal logic nor its individual purpose is taken into account.

On the whole, the stance adopted by the social theory of art was an external one—a view from the outside that effectively broadened the interpretive scope of Marxist scholarship on art. Both Antal and Hadjinicolaou, we should recall, dealt exclusively with figurative art, especially frescoes and easel paintings of the kind that were at the time associated with the notion of “high art.” That, in principle, was a matter of personal preference and field of specialization. Yet it can be argued that ideological analysis, as those authors practiced it, seemed to find its natural limit in those practices and objects that could not be readily analyzed in terms of ideological representation: abstract painting, conceptual art, craft, and the decorative arts. As the following sections will show, Lauer and García Canclini focused their

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 40. Emphasis in original.

analyses on both conceptual art and indigenous craft, allowing for an engagement with a question that Marxists, in general, had largely neglected—the question of the medium.

II

In his aforementioned book *Symbolic Production*, García Canclini examines the avant-garde projects that rose to prominence in Argentina during the 1960s. He contends that these projects were part and parcel of the developmentalist economic model championed by the local industrial bourgeoisie at the time. This point comes through quite clearly in the very title of the chapter that he devotes to the subject: “Symbolic Strategies of Economic Developmentalism.”

The term “developmentalism” does not have a single meaning. As an economic category, it designates the industrialization policies implemented during the mid-twentieth century in various Latin American countries in an effort to overcome the structural deficiencies of traditional models of extraction and exportation of raw materials (e.g., mining, agriculture, etc.). It also refers to the ideology that surrounded those efforts, which upheld as its paradigm the development achieved by the countries of the North Atlantic (the United States in particular) and measured progress in universal and absolute terms.²⁰ In his analysis, García Canclini employs these two definitions somewhat interchangeably, in the understanding that both speak to the same complex phenomenon. He maintains that the 1960s in Argentina were characterized by both objective transformations in the economic structure and a modernizing discourse that encouraged national development through the emulation of foreign models.

In this context, experimental art forms, ranging from pop and kinetic art to happenings and performance, received significant institutional support, primarily from the Torcuato Di Tella Institute. Founded in 1958 and named after a prominent Italian-Argentine engineer and businessman, the Di Tella awarded national and international prizes, offered grants, and hosted exhibitions of foreign artists in Buenos Aires as well as of young Argentine artists abroad.²¹

According to García Canclini, the development of the avant-garde was not the result of the spontaneous activities of artists. Not only did it have an institutional origin, but it was also spurred by the companies that had been transforming the Argentine economy through the introduction of new materials and technologies. Represented by organizations such as the

²⁰ There is yet another way of understanding developmentalism: as a view of history according to which all developed societies have gone through the same phases or stages. A critique of this normative, universalist view provides the backbone of García Canclini’s study of Mexican folk art, *Las culturas populares en el capitalismo* (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen, 1982).

²¹ For the history of the Di Tella Institute, see: John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Gaglianone, 1985); Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán arde.” Vanguardia artística y política en el 68 argentino* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2010).



2. Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, and Raúl Escari, *Happening para un jabalí difunto*, 1966. Newspaper clipping, *El Mundo* (Buenos Aires), August 21, 1966. Photo: Archivos en Uso.

Argentine Chamber of the Plastic Industry and the Argentine Industrial Union, these companies generated a form of patronage that did not merely fund local artists but also influenced their production methods through courses and training programs. As a result, García Canclini argues, the new avant-garde practices did more than just represent the economic and technological transformations occurring in Argentina: “At that point, the artists changed their language and their relation with the socioeconomic process *en masse*, by utilizing new materials (acrylic, plastic, polyester) and new technological procedures (light and electronic techniques, methods of serial reproduction). The new technology generated *different conceptions about the function of the artwork* (installations, ecological art) and *new attitudes towards materials*.”²²

Against this backdrop, projects inspired by Pop Art emerged, such as those of Dalila Puzzovio, Carlos Squirru, and Edgardo Giménez, who appropriated the language of advertising in an ironic vein and occasionally collaborated with design firms and fashion houses. More radical was so-called “mass media art” (*arte de los medios*). Among its most noteworthy practitioners were Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby, who were credited with orchestrating a happening that never actually occurred: news of the event (the so-called “Happening for a Dead Boar,” Fig. 2) circulated in August 1966 through reports and photographs published in several venues. The fictional nature of the event was revealed a month later. The artists’ goal, García Canclini observes, “was to allow for the meaning of the work to be formed in the process of its transmission and reception, not in that of its creation, in hopes

²² García Canclini, *La producción simbólica*, 109. Emphasis in original.

of revealing the role that the press played in the constitution of the aesthetic phenomenon.”²³ Despite their differences, all these projects flourished within a system that had been generated by economic developmentalism and possessed multiple complementary dimensions: the institutional (represented by the Di Tella Institute), the material (new materials and new technologies), the ideological (“the ambition of some Latin American bourgeoisies and progressive sectors of the oligarchy to grow economically by achieving a relatively autonomous development”), and the aesthetic (“the impetuous development of experimental freedom: the breaking of the walls that separated painting, sculpture, and architecture so as to favor mixed techniques, collages, and installations; the substitution of the academic standards of beauty and their favorite themes... with new compositional codes derived from a non-conventional use of objects”).²⁴

Thus, the decline of the avant-garde at the end of the 1960s was not merely the symptom of an “aesthetic crisis” (as García Canclini describes it); it revealed a crisis of the system as a whole: “the crisis of a particular way of organizing social, commercial, and institutional relations between artists, intermediaries, and the public.”²⁵ Here, it is worth recalling that, in 1968, most artists affiliated with the Di Tella protested what they considered a weak stance against political censorship. Tensions reached a climax when the police closed an installation of a simulated public restroom by Roberto Plate that had been covered with graffiti by exhibition visitors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of those messages were politically charged, some aimed at dictator Juan Carlos Onganía. Following the police intervention, the artists staged a mass walkout that precipitated the closure of the Di Tella that same year.

If such repression had angered the artists, so too did the failure of the project of industrial development in Argentina. It is not that those plans had triggered a nationwide economic crisis. As García Canclini observes, if they were deemed a failure, it was because they did not fulfill their promises of prosperity for all Argentines. Artists became increasingly aware of this situation at the critical juncture of 1968:

As the artists grew tired of the marathon of fashions they had been forced into so as to reproduce the artistic consumption of the [Western] metropolis, they realized that [their] vertiginous innovations were incongruous with an economic “development,” the stagnation of which went unmentioned in both [official] discourses and catalogs.²⁶

Although development was a mirage, especially in rural areas, the media in the capital city continued to cling to a triumphal rhetoric. It is no accident, García Canclini asserts, that in this context, avant-garde artists changed tack, abandoning the developmentalist paradigm to embark on projects that favored artisanal methods of production and that engaged with institutions that were the antithesis of the Di Tella, including labor unions and other grassroots

²³ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 102, 110.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

organizations. That was the case of *Tucumán Arde*, a large-scale “counter-information” campaign that drew public attention to the rampant poverty in the rural north of the country through sociological research, film, flyers, graffiti, posters, and exhibitions at the General Workers Union headquarters in Rosario and Buenos Aires.²⁷ This represented a dramatic revision of the artists’ practice—one that was inextricably linked to the crisis of the Di Tella.

García Canclini’s analysis is persuasive thanks to the boldness of the hypothesis that animates it and (as the author himself states) its “multidimensional” approach.²⁸ There are, however, several shortcomings. As I see it, the argument’s main flaw lies in the pervasive and somewhat indiscriminate use of the notion of developmentalism. This category allows García Canclini effectively to link economy, ideology, and art; yet it encompasses so much, is so broad and so elastic, that doubts can be raised about its real explanatory power. In his work, “developmentalism” serves as a catch-all for industrial growth, industrial products, fashion, advertising, mass media, and whatever else might be associated with affluent Western societies. It can be argued that García Canclini correctly grasps what the term “development” meant—or perhaps more precisely, evoked—for much of Argentine society at the time. The problem, however, is that his purported goal is not to trace the fortunes of an overloaded signifier akin to that of “modernity.” Instead, he seeks to establish strong causal connections that often prove elusive and, even when found, play but a minor role in his analysis.

Consider the following claim: “We will not be able to fully understand the aesthetic innovations of the 1960s in Argentina, nor in Latin America, until we reckon with the fact... that those transformations were induced by the companies that introduced the new materials.”²⁹ To substantiate this assertion, García Canclini devotes a significant portion of his argument to demonstrating how the Argentine industrial bourgeoisie actively sponsored avant-garde artists as part of a larger strategy to promote their products—a strategy with the ultimate goal, he concludes, of supporting developmentalism in its dual condition as economic program and ideological project. Still, he leaves unanswered the key question of how the introduction of the new materials actually impacted the artistic practices of the period. To what use did artists put plastic or steel? Moreover, his chosen examples are largely drawn from mass media art, which employs no such materials. Thus, García Canclini tacitly places plastic and newspapers, steel and television, in the same generic category—that of “new materials and new technologies.”

Needless to say, he is not suggesting that the Argentine Industrial Union had introduced television to the country or instructed artists as to its possible artistic uses. Rather, he claims that all of the avant-garde projects of the period, whether pop, kinetic, or conceptual, “resulted, in the end, from the same technological development.”³⁰ Despite their differences, they all had roots in “technological procedures... [that] made it possible to de-objectify the artwork: to a large extent, the work carried out with the new techniques can be repeated by

²⁷ For *Tucumán Arde*, see also Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán arde,”* especially 178–300.

²⁸ García Canclini, *La producción simbólica*, 99.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

anyone who knows how to manipulate the materials.”³¹ This sort of generalization is problematic in several respects, but the weakest part of the argument, I think, lies in the assertion that these new artistic conceptions were “induced” by the companies via their training courses. Here, García Canclini equates two things that might seem logically related at first: being trained in the use of new materials and adopting new conceptions of the art object. But one thing does not necessarily imply the other, as evidenced by the fact that long before the companies started offering their training courses, Argentine artists were alive to the possibilities offered by reproducibility and dematerialization. It is not that these companies gave rise to the avant-garde projects of the 1960s; they simply helped generate the conditions needed for them to thrive in a rather conservative cultural milieu. Along the same lines, one can also dispute García Canclini’s claim that the avant-garde practices of that period were about developmentalism *because* their corporate sponsors and the Di Tella Institute were committed to developmentalism. While these institutions indeed had an agenda, there is no reason to believe that the artists embraced it—or, more to the point, that their projects reflected it—just because they benefitted from those companies’ support.

García Canclini’s argument, however, is not without merit. At the time of its publication (in the late 1970s), it offered a pioneering inquiry into the formation of the field of artistic production in Argentina—one that shared much with the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.³² Like Bourdieu, García Canclini drew attention to the network of institutions and social actors that allow for both the production of art and the production of its symbolic value. But while Bourdieu construes the artistic field as a relatively autonomous space of social relations—a space of forces that strive for hegemony—García Canclini understands it to include:

The social and material relations that artists maintain with the other components of the aesthetic process: the means of production (materials, procedures) and the social relations of production (with the public, the gallerists, the critics, censorship, etc.).³³

At a theoretical level, this is an interesting approach; yet it yields little in terms of practical results because García Canclini fails to investigate the logic of technological advances. He sees them only as instruments of labor that are functional to an economic model and play no symbolic role other than transmitting its values. For all his insistence on the importance of taking into consideration the new ways of making, he simply regards them as either symbols or vehicles of some preestablished set of ideas.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³² García Canclini acknowledges Bourdieu’s influence here and elsewhere, especially that of early articles such as “Champ intellectuel et projet créateur,” *Les Temps modernes* 246 (November 1966), 865–906, and “Champ de pouvoir, champ intellectuel et habitus de classes,” *Scolies. Cahier de recherches de l’École normale supérieure* 1 (1971), 7–26. Moreover, he is the author of two of the six entries about Bourdieu in the annotated bibliography compiled by Lauer and Eder.

³³ García Canclini, *La producción simbólica*, 70.

III

In comparison to García Canclini's clear and effective presentation of a strong hypothesis, Lauer's empirical analyses, to which I turn now, are extraordinarily dense. They do not make for easy reading, in part due to the author's expansive style of argumentation, but also because of the wide range of phenomena that he addresses. Whereas García Canclini focuses on a specific historical juncture, Lauer deals with the *longue durée* of a highly fragmented country, both geographically and culturally.³⁴ Generally, his work analyzes the Peruvian art system as it came to function during the 1960s and '70s. According to Lauer, this system is comprised of high art and traditional craft (pre-Columbian art also plays a role, yet fundamentally as a source of inspiration). Key to understanding how these elements interact is their connection to a number of paired oppositions that collectively define Peruvian society: white and indigenous, urban and rural, the coast and the Andes, elite and popular, modern and traditional, the ruling and the working classes.

Prior to analyzing such relations, Lauer makes an important methodological remark concerning the very notion of art, which he takes to be thoroughly tainted by bourgeois idealist aesthetics that had developed in the West over the previous three centuries. In *Critique of Craft*, he writes:

At the heart of the idealist view of art lies the notion that there exists a class of objects and practices endowed with—and defined by—a transcendental attribute that is beyond history and grants them their ultimate meaning. But since that attribute happens to be indefinable, it can only be expressed by way of two distinct conceits that are not mutually exclusive: (1) the quality of being artistic is an a priori category of reality, with an axiomatic value for knowledge, or (2) the quality of being artistic results from a practice that is not regarded as a historical one, but rather as the realization of said transcendent and aprioristic quality.³⁵

Lauer's emphasis on history and historicity implies that the concept of art is an ideological construct that imparts special qualities to so-called artworks that other, presumably ordinary objects lack. Yet these qualities, while asserted as self-evident and universal, are indeed arbitrary and contingent. Here, the rationale, Lauer claims, is tautological, for "anything that is recognized as art comes to possess the quality of *art*."³⁶ If the goal is to pursue the study of art in the materialist sense, Lauer continues, the nomenclature "art" should be bracketed,

³⁴ For an in-depth discussion of Lauer's views, see: Mitrovic, "De la obra al objeto plástico." See also my article, "High, Low, and Beyond: The Question of Popular Art in Peru," *Art History*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2023), 68–100, which provides insight into some aspects of Lauer's thought that are not discussed in the present section, including his notion of material foundation (*soporte material*).

³⁵ Lauer, *Crítica*, 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22. Emphasis in original.

quarantined, or otherwise isolated, as it has become so tainted with idealist connotations that it would continue, even if marked as a social construct, to

divide the world of objects and their processes of production into two categories—what is artistic/what is not artistic—ruling out the possibility of intermediate objects or processes... and automatically excluding from the system any object or process that, given its characteristics, could modify the overall scheme.³⁷

Lauer thus proposes an alternative term, “la plástica,” which is not, in fact, a term of his own coinage, but rather a relatively common abbreviation of “artes plásticas” (plastic arts) throughout the Spanish-speaking world. As Lauer uses it, however, “la plástica” refers to what we might call in English “material culture,” allowing for constructions such as “la plástica erudita” (erudite material culture, i.e., high art) or “la plástica del precapitalismo” (pre-capitalist material culture, i.e., craft or folk art). In this sense, “la plástica” is not a substitute for “art,” but rather a more encompassing category that relativizes art by situating it within a wider array of symbolic goods and practices. Whether or not one finds it necessary to discard the term “art,” Lauer’s argument importantly levels the playing field, so to speak, drawing attention to why certain objects and practices are granted—or denied—the status of art within a given community.³⁸

In the particular case of Peru, traditional craft underwent a series of transformations during the twentieth century that brought it increasingly closer to the realm of high art. Those transformations were promoted, whether purposefully or not, by so-called indigenist artists. In a broad sense, indigenism was a current of thought and feeling led by middle-class intellectuals that, despite not being indigenous themselves, cast indigenous peoples and traditions as the cornerstone of the Peruvian nation.³⁹ Though in many cases politically committed, indigenist writers and artists did not speak on behalf of a nascent indigenous movement, nor did they actively participate in the peasant revolts that were taking place in the Andes during the early twentieth century. According to Lauer, their main objective was to challenge the paradigm of Peru as a Hispanic nation by embracing more autochthonous elements of Peruvian culture.⁴⁰

Chief among the indigenist artists was painter José Sabogal, who, in addition to pioneering modern Peruvian painting in terms of style and subject matter, also served as a

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ It should be noted that, in his own individual writings, Lauer consistently argues in favor of a social theory of *la plástica*. The persistence of the term “art” in the 1986 annotated bibliography suggests that Lauer’s colleagues may have had reservations about the new nomenclature.

³⁹ Lauer, *Crítica*, 115–16.

⁴⁰ For a subsequent revision of this account, see: Mirko Lauer, *Andes imaginarios. Discursos del indigenismo-2* (Cusco: Centro de Estudios Regionales Bartolomé de Las Casas-Sur, 1997).



3. Jesús Urbano Rojas, *Retablo ayacuchano (Palo encebado)*, 1958. Wood, potato flour, plaster, paint, 14.7 x 22.2 x 5.3 in. (37.4 x 56.5 x 13.5 cm). Santa Fe: Museum of International Folk Art (A.1979.32.808). Photo: Museum of International Folk Art.

professor and director of the National School of Fine Arts. Notably, Sabogal devoted a significant part of his time and efforts to the systematic study of traditional craft from different regions of the Andes. Indeed, his advocacy was so successful that, by the mid-1950s, Andean craft had become a familiar presence in the spaces of high art from which it had previously been excluded: galleries in Lima began to exhibit objects such as *retablos* from Ayacucho and engraved gourds from the central Andes, while a highbrow audience of craft connoisseurs attested to their growing prestige. But if craft came to receive a certain recognition, it was not simply because the elites had become more receptive to it. Attitudes had certainly changed, but Lauer stresses that craft itself had also objectively evolved in ways that made it more appealing to the consumers of high art.

Take, for example, the *retablo* from Ayacucho (Fig. 3). Most likely introduced as an instrument of evangelization during the colonial era, the *retablo* had historically served as a portable reliquary containing figures of Christian devotion that would bring protection to travelers and occupied a place of honor in festivities of cattle branding. Several strict rules governed what figures or scenes its wooden box could contain, as the *retablo* performed a ritualistic function. In the past, Lauer writes, “both the forms [of the *retablo*] and their meaning preexisted in the minds of makers and buyers; variations [whenever they happened] were but

a side effect of technique.”⁴¹ When collectors became acquainted with these objects during the early 1940s, they were told by local makers that their production had been in steady decline for years, if not decades, which led them to make a number of suggestions that proved crucial for the *retablo*'s subsequent history. Of these, the most important concerned the inclusion of scenes of everyday life: bullfights, cockfights, agrarian labor, and even representations of prisons would consequently come to fill the repertoire of *retablo* artisans. These new themes undoubtedly aided the preservation of traditional styles and techniques of production, yet the resulting objects could no longer be considered traditional, as they were no longer enmeshed within the spiritual life of the community. At this point, *retablos* had been inserted into a different frame of meaning, one in which the ideal of authenticity was met with expectations of innovation and originality. It was thus possible for craft to be judged by criteria akin to those of high art.

Although Lauer seems here to be merely recounting facts that had been well established by the early 1980s, his analysis is nonetheless original in that it emphasizes the larger changes that had been transforming Andean communities since the 1920s.⁴² In Lauer's account, the intervention of craft collectors and indigenist artists in the remaking of the traditional *retablo* was fundamentally a symptom or byproduct of structural factors that had been reshaping the pre-capitalist societies of the Andes: the growth of the national road system, the emergence of new technologies of communication, and the urbanization of rural areas.⁴³ For Lauer, then, the transformation of the *retablo* reflected the progressive insertion of Andean craft into a national market economy and, more broadly, the modernization of Andean rural communities. Not incidentally, he continues, the *retablo* had come to adhere to what he regards as the foundational binary of Western modern art.

According to Lauer, Western modern art is defined by a particular relation between representation and physical support in which the latter (epitomized by the framed canvas) functions as an abstract surface whose only purpose is to represent. That is not the case with art objects in pre-capitalist societies, where physical supports are not specifically dedicated to a single function:

Representation does not happen... on an abstract surface, but “directly upon” objects that are not specialized in representing: vessels, furniture, ornaments, garments, etc. The particular shape of those objects indicates how the representation should be organized.... [Here] we do not find a physical support whose value entirely depends on its being a specialized bearer of representations; in a pre-capitalist context, supports are defined departing from their manifold uses [*utilidades*]; use-value saturates them, and the aesthetic value is only one among other values.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Mirko Lauer, *Andes imaginarios*, 147.

⁴² See, for example: Emilio Mendizábal Losack, *La difusión, aculturación y reinterpretación a través de las cajas de imaginero ayacuchanas*, published as a supplement issue of *Folklore Americano* 11–12 (1963–64), 115–334.

⁴³ Lauer, *Crítica*, 148.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 148–49.

Yet another point of distinction for traditional craft is the finite range of representations that can be potentially inscribed on a given surface. Both tradition and ritual impose limits on what can be conceivably represented, which in turn speaks to an organic linkage between representation and its physical support. In fact, Lauer argues, the connection here is so strong that the binary itself cannot be said to exist:

For the majority of animist-polytheist religious rituals that are characteristic of pre-capitalism, the object is its representation, similarly to vulgar nominalism, in which the name is the thing. There exists no representation as we understand it today... but rather an “effective presence” of the divinity or an “effective” magical apprehension of the object.⁴⁵

In pre-capitalist societies, then, both use-value and ritual function converge in a way that cements the ontological unity of representation and physical support. In this context, moreover, the very notion of an aesthetic experience—an experience, that is, pertaining to a domain of its own—is absent. Such objects are not exclusively valued for the beauty, harmony, or sublimity of what is being represented.

In Western capitalist societies, by comparison, the former unity of representation and physical support (if we can even speak of that distinction) is torn asunder by both the conceptualization of representation as open to a potentially infinite range of possibilities and a transformation of the support into an abstract surface. In other words, the physical support becomes something of a screen or a blank slate for what the artist might imagine. The split between representation and support thus signifies a split between artist and community: it is the *individual* vision of the artist that takes precedence. The relationship between representation and support is no longer organic (which is to say, fixed within traditional parameters). It now allows the support to emerge as an abstract and universal template that can in principle encompass all aspects of reality. This process leads to a leveling of qualitative differences because every aspect of reality can now circulate on the same support, just as commodities do in a market economy. In Lauer’s own words,

the consecration of both the canvas and the frame (as well as that of the base in sculpture) as universal symbols of the abstract nature of representable reality makes it impossible for the transcendent to be a presence within society and opens the possibility of representation as illusion, as fiction.⁴⁶

When seen through this lens, the evolution of the *retablo* can be said to have undergone a decoupling of representation and physical support that brought the logic of modern Western art into the Andean world. Thus redefined, the *retablo*’s box came to function like a canvas in which a potentially infinite number of scenes could be represented. Like the canvas, the box now served as a neutral, abstract, and transportable support. While portability had always been a feature of the *retablo*, it now spoke to what Lauer described as the logic of “abstract

⁴⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 151.

and universal exchangeability.”⁴⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, *retablos* bore the artist’s signature, attesting to both the artist’s individuality and their market value.

In many respects, the modern *retablo* functioned like a painting, which explains why, in Lauer’s account, it had been “unproblematically integrated into the geography of the urban-dominant.”⁴⁸ It should be stressed that this integration did not result from some subjective decision made by the urban elite. If the *retablo* enjoyed something like an “artistic” status, it was thanks to the mechanisms of production, distribution, and consumption that determined its social existence: the aesthetic attitudes clustering around it were a logical conclusion of these objective determinations.

This is only one piece of a larger argument in which Lauer similarly examines more plebeian and commercial manifestations of Andean craft (i.e., those catering to a tourist clientele). I have not touched on the latter in an effort to keep things succinct, but also because I find the most original aspect of Lauer’s analysis to lie in the relations between high art and other manifestations of material culture.⁴⁹ Yet however insightful it might be, his analysis is not without inconsistencies. The first, and most obvious, concerns Lauer’s notion of art. He initially claims that this notion rests on “indefinable” attributes, despite later maintaining that so-called artworks—as understood in the Western modern tradition—are portable objects in which representation takes precedence over the physical support. In fact, Lauer’s explanation of how Andean craft successfully entered the realm of art in Peru relies on this premise. A second issue arises from the assumption that artworks in a capitalist economy are perforce commodities. While this seems factually correct, Lauer takes it a step further: he implies that an object can only become a commodity in the art market if it functions as a blank slate. Yet Lauer fails to substantiate this rather speculative claim. Finally, while Lauer compellingly argues that Western modern art relies on the preeminent status that a particular physical support acquires as a specialized vehicle for representation, he does not provide evidence that such a development was brought about by capitalism. In this respect, his account fails to meet the standards of a bona fide causal explanation. It equates correlation with causation—yet causal explanation, as Lauer repeatedly states, is supposed to be the distinctive feature of the social theory of art.

IV

As we have seen, the fundamental premise of the social theory of art is that art, as a social practice, can only be understood in light of its socioeconomic and technological determinants. Far from being extraneous to art (“context” in the trivial sense of “social background”), these determinants, so the theory goes, are consubstantial with it, inasmuch as they generate specific frames of meaning, favor certain artistic practices and collective attitudes towards art, and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, both Lauer and García Canclini published separate studies about the craft industry in Latin America. See: Mirko Lauer, *La producción artesanal en América Latina* (Lima: Mosca Azul, 1989); García Canclini, *Las culturas populares en el capitalismo*.

ultimately form the basis of aesthetic judgment. In keeping with this general outlook, both Lauer and García Canclini conduct analyses that emphasize causal and material relations. Yet they do so with the understanding that material determinants (e.g., the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of art) are necessarily mediated by a range of institutional structures, which is to say that whatever their impact, it is never direct or univocal.

This is the social theory of art in very broad brushstrokes. But theories—at least insofar as the humanities and social sciences are concerned—rarely yield steady results: more often than not, an examination of their core principles says little about their practical significance. For as much as Lauer and García Canclini share at a theoretical-exegetic level (the critique of ideological analysis, the perceived necessity of recovering the legacy of the “other” Marx, etc.), they are at odds over what might be called an “operational” question: the exact role that material determinants—especially technology—play in the production of art and its meaning. Without necessarily being a reductionist, García Canclini construes material determinants as both primarily economic and already ideologically charged. For him, their impact on art is invariably tied to the defense and reproduction of a given economic order. He thus tends to regard technology (contrary to his most general theoretical claims) as essentially a means of getting things done—a mere docile tool. Conversely, Lauer seems more interested in how material determinants impact the medium itself, irrespective of whatever ideology they convey or represent. In this respect, he appears certain that each mode of production possesses an inner logic that permeates different orders of society.⁵⁰

A second difference to note concerns the kind of phenomenon that each author discusses. Both case studies involve shifts in the public understanding of what art is or could be; yet one salient feature of the Peruvian case is that the very relevance of the signifier “art” comes under scrutiny. I do not mean to suggest that the case that Lauer analyzes is inherently richer or more relevant; my point is that the type of materialist analysis that the social theory of art heralds proves especially effective for making sense of contexts marked by complex interactions between different traditions (and markets) of symbolic goods, especially in post-colonial contexts where Western systems of art have long existed alongside autochthonous traditions. What the social theory of art precisely does is to provide a lowest common denominator for analyzing an array of symbolic practices that, depending on the context, may or may not be considered art. Those practices carry social meaning, which is in itself a function of the objective conditions within which those practices take place.

It should be emphasized here that the question of meaning is not linked to any discussion of individual intentions or the internal relations of a work. The meaning of art, as defined by Lauer and García Canclini, springs from patterns of social relations that are in turn brought about by the dynamics of productive forces. This is not to deny the role of individuality in absolute terms, nor is it to suggest that the dynamics of productive forces explain individual intentions on a micro-level. What the social theory of art proposes is to shift our focus from meaning as individually produced or experienced—the outcome of interpretation, ideological or otherwise—to meaning as structurally determined. This arises partly from a rejection of

⁵⁰ For a further discussion of Lauer’s and García Canclini’s views on material determination, see: Mijail Mitrovic, “La cultura popular en el ‘joven’ Néstor García Canclini: del marxismo gramsciano al posmodernismo progresista (1977–1982),” *Revista Antropologías del Sur*, vol. 9, no. 18 (2022), 145–65.

individuality as a bourgeois myth and partly from the certitude that, in the end, the driving force behind the production of art is necessity.

This methodology, then, provides a vantage point for analyzing contexts marked by complex relations between the art establishment and other non-hegemonic circuits, such as craft or folk art. It can also be fruitfully applied to projects, either modernist or conceptual, that address the question of their own materiality (i.e., the question of their objective existence in a web of socioeconomic relations). But for obvious reasons, this approach proves insufficient when the objective is to uncover individual intention, subjective experience, and aesthetic discourses. There is, I believe, something of a bias in assuming that engaging with these questions necessarily entails endorsing the bourgeois myth of individual genius or that the ideas and arguments put forward within a given artistic community are, if anything, ideological in the sense of offering self-serving justifications that obscure the “truth” of art as a socioeconomic phenomenon. It may well be the case that those discourses sublimate, rationalize, or otherwise conceal the socioeconomic function of art; but little is gained, I think, by simply circumventing them. Art, in the end, is also made of those fictions.