

George Flaherty

Destroying Art of the Americas Amid a Global Turn

The globalization of the discipline of art history, as evidenced in the U.S. by the Getty Foundation's "Connecting Art Histories" initiative and the Clark Art Institute's 2011 *In the Wake of the Global Turn* conference, should not be confused for a wholesale reconceptualization of our fields and methods, even if sponsored by two of its most august institutions. Globalization, widely understood through tropes of continual dislocation and relocation, has dislodged the a priori status of the nation-state to a degree while at the same time made connectivity appear inevitable. Rather, globalization has paradoxically produced even more complex structures of integration, differentiation and hierarchy. We can observe this in the fields of contemporary Latin American and U.S. Latino art, which is complicated by aesthetic and critical strategies created both inside and outside, whether to satisfy fantasies of difference or combat claims of derivation. This presentation draws from synchronous happenings staged by neo-avant-garde artists in the Americas, part of a constellation of destructivist artists in the 1960s, to argue that dominant art histories cannot simply be supplemented with "new" material. (This presentation is based in part on collaboration with colleague Andrea Giunta.)

Kenneth Kemble along with six other artists mounted an exhibition in Buenos Aires in 1961. *Arte Destructivo* displayed objects harvested from the streets near the port and city dump as well as the artists' possessions, including some of their own informalist paintings, which were aggressively cut, crumpled, and burned. This action was not, in the collective' view, gratuitous destruction or a belabored reference to nuclear catastrophe or the Vietnam War but a process of creation through its obverse. Destructive Art confronted both natural decomposition and consumer society's planned obsolescence. It was base but also pleasurable and critical, breaking modern art's illusion of organic unit and sensuous surface into cathartic fragments with unpredictable half-lives. Reviews of the exhibition were less generous. Several specifically compared the project to Surrealism and Dada—only coming 40 years too late. (Comparison to parallel developments in destructive art in Europe and the United States were not made by the Argentine critics, such as *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1961).)

New York-based artist Rafael Montañez Ortiz is best known for his piano destruction concert series and ritually played domestic items such as mattresses, and "recycled cinema," films made from newsreels and Hollywood genre films. Ortiz participated in the pivotal *Destruction in Art Symposium*, performing a series of seven destructive actions in London in 1966. He went on to found the Museo del Barrio in New York in 1969, an early major center of U.S. Latino Art in the U.S. After this point, though, he came only to be received as a "ethnic" artist, operating in a virtual margin within a global center of artistic production.

Situating Global Art

These case studies permit us to observe another paradox: revisions to the historical avant-garde enacted by neo-avant-gardes in the centers of Europe and the United States are considered original contributions whereas those produced outside are evaluated as anachronistic derivatives. This conclusion was not only the product of the center looking to the periphery; critics located in the periphery also utilized this rubric. These cases suggest that “global” art phenomena such as deconstructivist art must be deconstructed (“destroyed”) simultaneously from both sides of the Atlantic.

Trained as an art historian, **George Flaherty** specializes in Latin American and Latino visual and spatial cultures since 1940, with additional research interests in film and media studies and postcolonial theory. He is completing a book manuscript that explores the spatial dimensions of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City and its representation. George’s research has been supported by the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (National Gallery of Art, Washington), Getty Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Society of Architectural Historians, and a Fulbright-García Robles grant to Mexico, where he was a visiting scholar at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. His essays and reviews have appeared in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, *History of Photography*, *Desafío de la estabilidad: procesos artísticos en México, 1952-1967* (MUAC 2014), and *Latin American Modern Architectures: Ambiguous Territories* (Routledge 2012). A graduate of Swarthmore College and the University of California, Santa Barbara, he is an assistant professor of art history and associate director of the Center for Latin American Visual Studies (CLAVIS) at the University of Texas, Austin.