THE MATTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AMERICAS

Natalia Brizuela and Jodi Roberts

With contributions by
Lisa Blackmore, Amy Sara Carroll, Marianela D’Aprile, María Fernanda Domínguez, Heloisa Espada, Rachel Price, Diana Ruiz, Tatiane Santa Rosa, and Kyle Stephan

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WHAT'S THE MATTER

Natalia Brizuela

THE MATTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY TODAY

The square shows nothing; there is no figure in it; it represents nothing, despite it being—according to its title and what can be recognized from its iconic shape—a type of photograph. Nothing is represented, that is, beyond the gold. Along the bottom of the square is printed the word POLAROID and a series of numbers: 1103904104. Similar numbers identify every Polaroid image in the world, branding each as authentic and unique.

This golden image (fig. 1) was made in 2015 by Costa Rican artist Priscilla Monge and belongs to a series in which she gilded large digital prints of Polaroids. The images in the series are titled either Amanecer or Atardecer (Sunrise or Sunset) and always include the Polaroid serial number (see also pl. 128). What objects or worlds the original Polaroid captured, if it captured anything at all, are invisible in Monge’s works. Beneath every sheet of gold lies a hidden image. The works in the series do not show a world but rather reflect whatever world is placed before it. They are, in essence, golden, sacred mirrors.

Monge’s use of gold leaf is a tribute to Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who saw Gold Field (1982; fig. 2) by Roni Horn at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1990. The work moved him, he said, toward “a new landscape, a place of rest and absolute beauty... a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty... a place to dream, to regain energy, to dare.”1 Horn’s large, thin, rectangular sheet of one kilo of pure gold, placed directly on the floor, was created during a decade that Gonzalez-Torres described as one of “trickle-down economics... growing racial and class tension... defunding vital social programs... abandonment of ideals... explosion of the information industry, and at the same time the implosion of meaning... the fabulous decade was depressing. Especially in the face of public inaction, and the absence of an organized reaction to so many devastating statistics.”2 The 1980s were also the decade of the AIDS crisis. This dire epidemic, marking New York City and San Francisco most visibly, stemmed from a global structure whose shape traced the development of colonial networks and the structural or systemic violence of capitalism. As consumer culture reached a new peak, health and life itself became a matter controlled by pharmaceutical companies.

For Gonzalez-Torres, Horn’s sheet of gold raised hope as it transformed the very matter and measure of wealth—gold—into the glowing light of dreams. The depressing state of a world increasingly hemmed in by the rise of neoliberal policies and structures from the 1970s onward achieved, in Gonzalez-Torres’s eyes, a moment of redemption in Horn’s artwork, lying on the gallery floor. It marked a stark contrast to the way life was increasingly monetized in the 1970s and 1980s, as markets became the only recognized measure of human and social value. If the trading of goods, which thereby established abstract forms of value, had complete control over life, then art needed to take the element most precious to the market, the standard essential to its functioning—gold—and turn it into sheer beauty, emptying it of any preestablished meaning. Gold Field was displayed at LAMOCA unadorned, unmediated, as “the simple physical reality” of gold itself.3 For Gonzalez-Torres, the shiny, reflective, golden square—with nothing more to it than its material existence, not taking on or offering any stable shape—alluded to the world of commodity exchange. By extension, then, it also referred to the neoliberalization of life the Cuban artist so eloquently and indirectly described when reacting to Horn’s piece. Art was placed quite literally at ground level, on the same plane and position as the lives trampled on and discarded by declining welfare states and rising market economies. Gold Field suggested the need for another form of value and another form of art—one that retained the auratic capacity of art in the midst of the traffic, consumption, and commodification of everything. As life under neoliberalism became more precarious, art could “redeem” (as Gonzalez-Torres argued) and critique (as I argue); it could counter the rise of social and economic precarity by offering, among other strategic propositions, ephemeral “little things,” to borrow Gonzalez-Torres’s term.

Monge’s Amanecer and Atardecer series enact a similar critique. She takes a Polaroid—a unique, authentic, degradable physical object of little intrinsic value—and turns it into a digital image—infinitely reproducible, durable, immaterial, of indefinite value—and then covers it with gold. In a dizzying realm of digital images and computer technologies that makes everything visible, invades all privacy, and creates virtual bodies, objects, and worlds, Monge’s work with Polaroids offers a reflection...
on the matter of photography and makes the image precious, fragile, and generative. The reflective, gold-covered photograph is an infinitely changing, unstable, image-producing surface. It is the bearer of aura, mystery, the beauty of what cannot be fully seen, of what does not reveal itself as a fully formed figure, and for that reason it engages the imagination and the senses. Suggesting a grounding for photography that is both physical and metaphysical, worldly and otherworldly, Monge’s work is an invitation into the realm of the sensorial. Her gold-covered images resensitize us in our desensitized world of photographic and digital imaging. In her hands, photographs are made to matter by taking on matter, critiquing the dematerialization promoted by the digital and the excessive visualization brought about by the popularity of the photographic medium over the last century.

According to Monge, her images constitute spectral returns: the return of Gonzalez-Torres, Horn, and the history of sacred art. Gold has a long, widespread, and heterogeneous history as a spiritual medium. It has been both a reservoir of radiance, attracting all light, and a source of light—and life—itself. It has also measured wealth, value, and worth. Unlike other materials used in art from the ancient to early modern periods, gold was not a color obtained from the processing of plants or stones; it is a rare and precious physical metal in itself. Monge’s Amanecer and Atardecer series are not representations of the world. They are the matter of the world.

The Polaroid collapsed all steps in the making of an analog photograph—exposing negatives, developing film, creating prints—into a single click. It was an instant photograph. Globally popularized in the 1960s and 1970s, Polaroids came to epitomize vernacular photography in the form of the family snapshot, recording intimate details of everyday life in immediate, singular images. It was this speed that made Polaroids seem more truthful than other photographs—despite always being slightly out of focus and off in their color renditions. Yet the instantaneity of Polaroids came at a cost, namely the suspension of the characteristics most closely associated with the century-old medium: seriality, reproducibility, clarity, durability. Polaroids made the serialized image par excellence—the photograph—into a unique, irreproducible image: yet the final positive image was instantaneous.

Monge’s Polaroid-based images join a group of recent works by artists who are exploring the matter of photography, the ever-shifting possibilities of the elements that originally constituted the medium: light on light-sensitive material, reflections and shadows. Today’s digital world is hyperconnected and hyperconnected. Images are now data, and they travel the globe at vertiginous speed. It should be no surprise, therefore, that artists are questioning the infinite reproducibility of the photograph by making work that is irreproducible despite being photographic or quasi-photographic. The unique work (a Polaroid, for example) resists the travel, the speed, the information quality of today’s image world. These artists critique the total visibility our Internet age heralds by working with
eleven issues, all published in four months of 1938, addressed the public’s appetite for visual news as a “supergraphic magazine.” According to a critic at the time, the short-lived Mexican magazine was “without precedents of any kind in journalism from any country, Rotofoto says it all through photography.” By that time, photographers and editors from newspapers and magazines could scan photographs and subject them to photosensitive beams that registered their light and dark tones and translated them into signals that were carried across wires. Communication technology had transformed photographs into signals, data, mere bits of information. In the early days of the mass media, images were delivered to newspapers by mail, train, or airplane, a journey that could take days. Yet in 1935 news agencies transmitted the first photograph through special telephone lines from California to New York in a mere ten minutes. Images moved across the globe, bought and sold as commodities, via wires, cables, even, briefly, radio. In the 1960s, wire photos would begin their rapid transformation into digital images, turning images into information, and speeding up their circulation. By 1989 digital transmission of photographs via satellite took just sixty seconds.

**PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF MASS MEDIA**

Photographically illustrated magazines—such as the Mexican Rotofoto and Hoy and the Brazilian O cruzeiro—had appeared in the 1930s and 1940s throughout Latin America. Rotofoto’s mere protophotographic or photographic images that offer refractions from this totalizing thrust. Their works also question representation, since nothing can really be seen in them—or at least nothing other than the effects of light and time on a sensitive surface. Monge’s Amanecer and Atardecer series exemplify this trend. In today’s digital world, a unique copy of a photographic or protophotographic image is a clear sign of outdatedness, of vintage-minded hipness, or a critical intervention into the medium and the state of the image world. Photographs that deny representation constitute a new ontology of light and color, refusing to be readable. They propose a radical use of images aimed at exploring matter. These artists undo what we have known photography to be and to enable.
Between the 1930s and the 1960s the mass media became increasingly visual in its presentation and global in its reach, and these mass-circulated photographs began to make their way into works of art in Latin America and elsewhere. Photography, and more specifically photographs created for or used by news sources and in advertising, became the “raw matter” of experimentation for a new generation of artists acutely attuned to the popular press. As this publication and the exhibition it accompanies demonstrate, the elision of boundaries between mass-mediated photography and the realm of contemporary art prompted a profound rethinking of photography as an artistic medium and an aesthetic pursuit. By the 1960s something was the matter with photography.

Evidence of the impact of mass-media photographs on Latin American artists is pervasive after 1960. Brazilian Helio Oiticica’s homage to a fallen hero, Boa Viagem (Homemage to Cara de Cavalo) (Box B33 case 18, tribute to Cara de Cavalo; 1965–66) features a widely circulated image of his friend Manoel Moreira (aka Cara de Cavalo) after he had been shot more than 100 times by the police in a chase in 1964. Colombian Beatriz González’s oil painting Los suicidas del Sisga no. 1 (The suicides of Sisga no. 1; 1965; fig. 3) is modeled after a 1964 image of two suicidal lovers who had photographed themselves before jumping off the newly built Sisga Dam (fig. 4). Argentine Antonio Berni (fig. 5), Claudio Tozzi (fig. 6), and Roberto Jacoby (fig. 7) made use of Alberto Díaz’s iconic 1960 portrait of Che Guevara wearing his starred beret. Brazilian Waldemar Cordeiro’s early digital images relied on news photographs, most famously a portrait of a suffering Vietnamese woman in A mulher que não é B.B. (The woman who is not B.B.; 1971; pl. 99). Chilean Eugenio Dittborn’s 1977 exhibition Final de pista (End of the track) in Santiago made use of photographic portraits collected from popular Chilean magazines and newspapers printed between the 1930s and the 1970s (figs. 8–10). These and seemingly other works make evident that, between the mid-1960s and the mid- to late 1970s, artists whose work evolved in different national contexts and who aligned themselves with distinct and at times even competing aesthetic and conceptual schools found in mass-media photographs a spur to creative action and matter ripe for transformation.

Looking across the region, this widespread investigation of photography’s proliferation in public spheres resulted in wildly diverse works in terms of material makeup, stylistic form, and message. Latin American artists not only incorporated photographs directly into their paintings as real-world source material but also translated photographs into other mediums and visual languages. Cordeiro’s slick, objectivist, profoundly antinaturalistic and anti-emotional art practice could not be farther from Berni’s politically explicit figurative realism, yet at a certain moment both artists turned to photographic images printed in the mass media. Despite the wide variety of uses Latin American artists made of mass-media photography in the late twentieth century, their shared interest in and utilization of such sources spoke to a historical moment. These artists recognized the transformation of photographs into information and commodifiable data. It was a process that helped set the stage for the neoliberalization of economies and cultures. This new interconnectedness and heightened visibility engendered by mass-media photography evolved under the banner of progress and freedom—progress out of underdevelopment and freedom from socialism, communism, and populism. They recognized mass media’s power.

This moment gave birth to the salient features of what today we still call “contemporary art.” Artists around the world considered photographs printed in the news media up for grabs, ready-made material for any and all. As such, photographs became one more material for artists to work with at a time when the boundaries between traditional artistic media—painting, drawing, sculpture—began to break down; when encounters with other art forms—dance, music, architecture—became commonplace; and when new technologies—video, television—came to the fore. In the 1960s and 1970s artists in Latin America left behind traditional art materials to engage with the highly politicized worlds of national policy and international relations.

The images that blighted the pages of newspapers and magazines were, by the 1960s, traveling images, reproduced in multiple venues within a given nation and outside of it, generating a greater interconnectivity within a given country and around the globe. As already noted, news photographs first traveled as information through the telegraph in what were known as wire photos, a technology developed by Associated Press and inaugurated in 1935. Significantly, the very first wire photo portrayed violence—an airplane crash—foretelling their use during World War II. It was then that photographs began to travel the globe with unprecedented speed for the sake of military intelligence and journalistic use. As the first truly global war, “it posed entirely new problems of manpower, expense, transport, and communication.” More than representations, realistic and indexical photographs functioned as containers of practical information that could be transmitted easily across continents and oceans. Given this history, it’s no surprise that the photographs appropriated and transformed by Latin American artists in the 1960s frequently featured images of the dead, nearly dead, or suffering.

And then satellites changed everything. October 4, 1957, witnessed the successful launch of the Soviet Sputnik into space, marking the beginning of the Space Race of the 1950s and 1960. Then, on July 10, 1962, information went global, as satellites...
Fig. 3 Beatriz González (Colombia, b. 1938), Los suicidas del Sisga no. 1 (The suicides of Sisga no. 1), 1965. Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 in. (120 x 100 cm). Collection of Diane and Bruce Halle.

Fig. 4 Press clipping from El Tiempo, June 29, 1963, source image for Beatriz González’s Los suicidas del Sisga no. 1 (fig. 3). Collection of the artist.
Fig. 5  Antonio Berni (Argentina, 1905–1981), *Untitled*, 1967–68. Acrylic on canvas, 20⅞ x 24⅝ in. (52.5 x 62 cm). Private collection.

Fig. 6  Claudio Tozzi (Brazil, b. 1944), *Che Guevara*, 1968. Paint on Eucatex panel, 68 ⅞ x 68 ⅞ in. (175 x 175 cm). Collection of the artist.

Fig. 7  Roberto Jacoby (Argentina, b. 1944), *Un guerrillero no muere para que se lo cuelgue en la pared* (A guerrilla does not die to be hung on a wall), 1969. Silk screen, 18⅞ x 12⅝ in. (47.5 x 32.5 cm). Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA).
EL PINTOR DEBE SUS TRABAJOS AL CUERPO
DE LA FOTOGRAFIA, EMBALSAMADO EN Y POR
LA FOTOCOPIA, DEPOSITO DE LOS DESPOJOS FOTOGRAFICO;
DEBE SUS TRABAJOS A LA INTERVENCION
DE LA FOTOCOPIA SOBRE LA FOTOGRAFIA,
INTERVENCION QUE AUTOMATICAMENTE
EMPALIDECE, CALCINA, PERFORA, YODA, DRENA, CONGESTIONA,
FRAGILIZA, DESHIDRATA, REVIEJE, ENCOGE, ASFIXIA, OXIDA,
QUEMA, SALINIZA, CONTAMINA, AZUMAGA, ALQUITRANA,
DESHILACHA Y EROSIONA LA CORTEZA DEL CUERPO FOTOGRAFICO,
PREVENDOLO DESTRUIDO;

Fig. 8 Eugenio Dittborn (Chile, b. 1943), page 11 from E. Dittborn: Final de pista (E. Dittborn: End of the track) (Santiago: Galería Época, 1977). Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin.

Fig. 9 Eugenio Dittborn (Chile, b. 1943), text found on page 18 of E. Dittborn: Final de pista (E. Dittborn: End of the track) (Santiago: Galería Época, 1977). Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin.

Fig. 10 Eugenio Dittborn (Chile, b. 1943), page 23 from E. Dittborn: Final de pista (E. Dittborn: End of the track) (Santiago: Galería Época, 1977). Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin.
became the next frontier for communication with the launch of Telstar 1. Described by NASA as “the world’s first active communication satellite,” Telstar enabled “TV programs to be broadcast across the Atlantic.” The first program it relayed from the United States to Western Europe was a tour of US monuments, landscapes, cities, and culture (the Statue of Liberty, a baseball game) that ended with a televised press conference from President John F. Kennedy. The broadcast, in effect, inaugurated the contemporary information age. Sönke Kunkel has called the 1960s the age of the “global flood of images” and the “age of visual media.”

The Vietnam War was another turning point in this global dissemination of photographs as commodifiable information. Not surprisingly, images of the Vietnam War quickly appeared in artworks in Latin America. Take, for instance, Cordeiro’s previously mentioned *A mulher que não é BB (1971)* or Juan Carlos Romero’s *American Way of Life* (1966, fig. 11), a work that marked the Argentine artist’s first use of appropriated images and texts from the press and other sources, a strategy that would become commonplace in his oeuvre. Romero exhibited the work in the 1966 group exhibition *Homenaje al Vietnam* (Homage to Vietnam) at the Van Riel Gallery in Buenos Aires (fig. 12), where works by 200 artists and intellectuals overwhelmed the space with varied creative critiques of the war. *American Way of Life* is divided into two distinct halves, each in turn divided into nine square fields, rendering the whole a grid. In the left half, a news image of a US soldier kicking a Vietnamese man in the face with the caption “The ‘ranger’ vents his rage out on a Vietcong prisoner” occupies the middle section of the grid while eight squares of cut and folded white paper surround the image. On the right half, the triangular folds of paper occupy the central square, which is surrounded by squares repeating a headline reading “VIETNAM” and a fragment of another photograph from the war. Reading the image left to right, we see real-world news taking over geometric abstraction as the work begins to roar, naming the war over and over again.

At the height of this conflict, advances in wire photography ensured that news reports were visual stories as much as textual accounts. This shift again fed a global hunger for on-the-ground pictures, augmenting a demand for images of the international crisis. Photographers flocked to Vietnam to take photographs and sell their images to news agencies able to distribute them globally. Horst Faas, the Saigon photo chief of Associated Press, paid $15 per photograph in the mid-1960s. By March 1968 there were more than 600 accredited correspondents in the field in Vietnam. Most carried a camera.

There was a direct link between the images of the Vietnam War that flooded the press and events taking place in Latin America and the Caribbean. The 1959 Cuban Revolution exacerbated Cold War tensions between communism and capitalism and set the stage for the development of numerous resistance movements throughout Latin America and beyond. An overwhelming number of artists and intellectuals in the region followed and supported developments in Cuba, which were ideologically tied to the war in Vietnam. If the Cuban Revolution marked a moment of successful resistance to the expansion of US-led capitalism, the war in Vietnam signaled the US system’s continued, devastating effects on smaller countries around the world.

In the mid-twentieth century, technological advances enabled the rapid circulation of news images around the globe. A motivating force behind this global circulation was a booming market for images of “crisis.” World War II and the Vietnam War formed spectators hungry for images ever more horrific and graphic. These crises set the stage for the rise of neoliberalism throughout the West, including Latin America. Buoyed by the growing economic and political power of the United States, capitalism spread, support for welfare states collapsed, and markets for news images of international events that directly or indirectly made visible the new world order thrived.

**THE DARK SIDE OF PROGRESS**

While the Latin American artists who turned to mass-media photographs in the late 1960s and 1970s were in many respects heterogeneous, most demonstrated a keen preoccupation with images of state-perpetuated violence. During this period, violence became an ever more consumable spectacle, especially in the guise of information and knowledge. This spectacle of violence also signaled the artists’ awareness of the mass media’s capacity to manufacture consent, to borrow Noam Chomsky’s term, and its departure from any kind of neutrality. It is no coincidence that the expansion of photographic media coverage in Latin America coincided with radical political transformations there in the 1960s and 1970s: in Chile, the CIA-backed military coup led by Augusto Pinochet against the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende in 1973 ushered in seventeen years of dictatorship; in Colombia, the emergence in 1964 of two important armed groups, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces), laid the groundwork for decades of struggle; in Brazil, the overthrow of socialist president João Goulart in 1964 by a military coup inaugurated a twenty-year period of dictatorial rule; in Cuba, extreme censorship, as early as 1961, of any form of expression—and later forms of life—not considered “for the
Revolution” led to numerous purges throughout decades and eroded early enthusiasm for Fidel Castro’s communist regime. These and many more political crises in Latin America made manifest intense conflicts: some born of a neoliberal drive toward individualism, private-sector politics, and the financialization and commercialization of all aspects of life under the banner of progress and development; others spurred by increasingly urgent critiques of this drive by those whose bodies and lives served as fuel for the growth of capital. These circumstances gave rise to new subversive uses of mass-media photographs in Latin American art. The process gave shape to the emerging field of contemporary art there—a brand of contemporary art that showed itself to be explicitly political by calling into question a world unified in its movement toward “progress” and
art object? In the midst of such increased visibility, were some images more important than others? What was the matter of photography, and did photography matter anymore, in an image world dominated by the rise of TV?

While a movement toward democratic forms of political representation had emerged earlier in the twentieth century, the post-1950s political context was marked by an intense focus on economic investment in development, a preoccupation that would quickly prove to be catastrophic for the vast majority of Latin Americans. Across the region, grandiose monuments to this ideology took the form of spectacular urbanization projects. At the same time, nightmarish signs of continued and expanded poverty and inequality emerged, only to be quickly covered up and made invisible. The heightened, self-conscious visibility given to progress and development accompanied the repression and suppression of vulnerable populations whose lives developmentalist rhetoric claimed to improve.

Perhaps no building campaign better embodied the mid-twentieth century’s developmentalist drive than the construction of Brasília in Brazil. The construction of the monumental city, the utopian dream made real, proceeded in record time by marshaling the labor of thousands of workers. The hopes for progress put into action in Brazil in the late 1950s yielded in Brasília a truly extraordinary work of architecture and urban planning. This occurred at the expense of thousands of bodies as workers flocked to the construction site and were hired by the hundreds every day as the clock ticked on the state’s promises to deliver a city built from scratch in less than five years. Of these thousands, an unknown number were buried in the city’s foundations as a result of construction accidents that were never reported. While particularly chilling, given the colossal nature of the project, this is merely one instance of the human lives

“Western democracy” regardless of the toll on human lives and the devastation of the planet’s ecology.

Latin American artists made their way through a sea of mass-media images, making sense of an overabundant world of pictures that either insisted on smiling faces of happy people walking toward a brighter future thanks to development and progress or on spectacularized pain and suffering. The world, its progress and its pain, had become commodities and information. Was this the beginning of a move away from the world and an embrace of the world-as-image? What was photography’s characteristic as an artistic medium, especially once photography had made it into the museum space as fine art, even if with difficulty and resistance? Could mass-media photographs serve as political vehicles enabling the dematerialization of the

Fig. 12 Poster for Homenaje al Vietnam (Homage to Vietnam) exhibition at the Van Riel Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1966. Offset lithograph print on paper, 17¼ x 25½ in. (45 x 65 cm). Claudio Rabendo collection.
sacred and the increased vulnerability tolerated as a natural cost of progress—one that needed to remain invisible.

The postwar effort to structurally and financially rebuild European countries and promote and aid the development of the global South—under the motto of “the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas,” as President Harry Truman stated in his 1949 inaugural address—set the stage for the various projects undertaken from the 1950s through the 1970s. The United Nations dubbed the 1960s the “Decade of Development,” and the UN Development Bank and its branch focused on Latin America, the Comisión Económica para América Latina, along with the US-controlled Alliance for Progress in the Organization of American States, provided financial backing for these schemes. The monumental construction projects that were undertaken by practically all Latin American countries during this period depended on transnational agreements, investments, and conditions. Some of these projects were public, others private. Many of the most emblematic projects unfolded in Brazil—Oscar Niemeyer’s large-scale, multiuse Edifício Copan (1952–66; fig. 14), the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1957–68; fig. 15), the design and construction of the new capital, Brasília (1957–60; fig. 13)—yet comparable urban interventions envisioned as spatial and visual representations of progress popped up throughout the continent. Such projects emphatically declared that the future had arrived in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Almost daily, news sources in Latin America and abroad ran stories on construction projects, the jobs they generated, and the lives they positively affected. According to headlines and news photographs, Latin America and its citizens were finally “entering” modernity or “becoming” modern. However, the contemporary art practices featured in this exhibition and analyzed in this book disregarded glossy images of progress—unless they were parodied. Rather, the artists of the 1960s and 1970s and their heirs gave visibility to and intervened upon images of the dark side of progress. Artists such as Cordeiro, González, Jacoby, and Dittborn share something that explains the emphasis on the political and historical in their works—works that questioned the globally interconnected world they were immersed in through its photographic presentations in mass media. Each of these artists foregrounded the experience of collective trauma—military coups, the dismantling of democratic welfare states, the disappearance of common citizens, war—as an integral part of the slow violence of progress. The effect of this “progress” in Latin America—and its attendant politics, dependent on making lives precarious and stifling the struggle for social equality—was devastation, even death, for millions: dead workers disposed of, hidden from view, made invisible so as to be forgotten, literally made part of the foundations of Brasilia; the unknown number of bodies of the students and workers murdered by the Mexican state on October 2, 1968 (fig. 16), in the midst of a peaceful protest in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City and the housing project inaugurated there a few years earlier (fig. 17); the thousands of indigenous people of the rain forest who lost their lands and livelihoods in order for Brazil to become a global superpower by turning the Amazonia into an economically productive region.

The use Latin American artists made of mass-media photographs in the 1960s and 1970s speaks to the tragic fate of bodies in the race for progress. These artists used images as information in the degraded form that photographs acquired as they flooded print media. And that information—in technological and social terms—was markedly horrific. More than any other characteristic, the work of these Latin American artists shares a focus on the body. Mass-media images presented some bodies and kept others invisible. Mechanically reproduced pictures mattered because they made vulnerability and precariousness a problem that was difficult to ignore. A closer look at the art worlds of Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico reveals different models of how artists living through democratic crisis and economic liberalism did—or did not—take up the photographic medium as material for artistic investigation. Argentina, Brazil, and Chile were marked by long periods of dictatorship during those times—1955–83, 1964–84, and 1973–90, respectively—and the use of mass-media photography was extremely prevalent in the art scenes in all three countries. In Mexico, by contrast, the appropriation of preexisting photographic sources was rare. The nature of the Mexican government in the 1960s and 1970s differed from those of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. No visible dictatorship ruled Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century, but a single party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party; PRI), ruled the government for seventy-one years. This profoundly antidemocratic continuity generated an outward sense of stability—particularly when compared to its Central American, South American, and Caribbean neighbors—in the form of a caring, all-powerful, paternal(istic) state. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico, and Canada took effect in 1994 and established a very particular type of political and economic structure for Mexico, where the PRI’s role as a paterfamilias was replaced with dominance by the United States. In political and economic terms, the 1960s and 1970s set the stage for the neoliberal practices that would reign in Latin America during the last three decades of the twentieth century. And they laid the groundwork for the more recent works in this book and accompanying exhibition.

Fig. 14 Edifício Copan, São Paulo, designed by Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil, 1907–2012), c. 1967. Photograph by Marcel Gautherot (Brazil, b. France, 1910–1996). Marcel Gautherot / Instituto Moreira Salles Collection.

Fig. 15 Museu de Arte de São Paulo, designed by Lina Bo Bardi (Brazil, b. Italy, 1914–1992), built 1957–68. Photograph by Nelson Kon (Brazil, b. 1961).
Fig. 16 Mexican army troops escort a group of young men from Tlatelolco’s Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City, October 3, 1968. The plaza was the scene of bloody clashes between the army and rioting students. Associated Press photograph.

Fig. 17 Armando Salas Portugal (Mexico, 1916–1995), Conjunto Nonoalco Tlatelolco (detail), 1964.
DEMATÉRILIZACIÓN / FAKE NEWS

On October 30, 1966, the Argentine artists Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby—known as the Grupo de Arte de Medios (Art and Media Group)—published their manifesto, “Un arte de los medios de comunicación” (An art of communication media), in the newspaper El mundo. They stated that in the mass-mediated life of the 1960s, the public was no longer in direct contact with cultural facts but instead received information about them through newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV. Getting on board with the technological—and informational—conditions of their time, they planned to construct artworks within the mass media and not simply take elements and techniques from it, as pop art had done: “unlike Pop, we intend to construct artwork from within communications media accordingly.” The group’s explicit aim was the “de-realization of objects” (“la desrealización de los objetos”). That meant understanding objects not as physical entities but as representations of representations; transmission overrode realization. The young artists were making an assault on the increasingly media-saturated environment of the 1960s. They were looking for ways to make art as mediated information that did not need to exist in any realm beyond the circuits of the mass media and to have art take on the very structures of media and become media. The manifesto was a telling response to Marshall McLuhan’s The Medium Is the Message: the message varies depending on the material features of the channel that transmits it. Years later, Jacoby stated the group sought to show “how the mass media generates the events, determines the behaviors of the people, makes up reality.”

Their teacher and mentor, the theorist and artist Oscar Masotta, would name the process of transformation and mutation of art in the early 1960s “dematerialization.” In 1968 he wrote, “The ‘matter’ (‘immaterial,’ ‘invisible’) with which information works of this type are constructed is none other than the processes, results, facts and/or phenomena of information triggered by the mass media (e.g., ‘media’: radio, television, newspapers, magazines, posters, ‘panels’, comic strips, etc.).”

The first work produced by the Grupo de Arte de Medios, Happening para la participación total (Happening for total participation) had taken place months earlier, on August 15, 1966. The group fed multiple print media outlets a press release and staged photographs of a happening that never actually took place. It was publicized and reviewed as though it had. Readers of the newspapers and magazines were fed fake news. This production became known as the “anti-happening” because it consisted of a nonexistent happening; it also came down in history as Happening para un jabali difunto (Happening for a dead boar) because that’s what one reviewer called it.

The Grupo de Arte de Medios only lasted a year, and its interventions, while seemingly apolitical, stressed a number of issues that would become highly politicized by 1968: the dissolution of art into the social systems of life; the collective as the means for the art world to transform the social body; a critique of the subject-individual; the problem of fake news. In 1968 the dematerialization of art in Argentina culminated in three major works. In the Experiencias 68 (Experiences 68) group exhibition, held at the Instituto di Tella in Buenos Aires, Jacoby set up Mensaje al di Tella (Message in the Di Tella); and David Lamelas presented the Oficina de Información de la Guerra de Vietnam (Vietnam War information office) in the Argentine Pavilion at the Venice Biennial. In both of these works, information channels, the transmission of news, and their ideological biases were the central concern.

The lessons learned by Jacoby in his earlier “anti-happening” were taken to the limit in Tucumán arde (Tucumán is burning), where art became completely immersed in the social fabric of life. The Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia organized this “interventionist event” in the offices of the Confederación General del Trabajo (Confederation of Labor) in Rosario and Buenos Aires in response to misinformation the government and its surrogates were feeding the Argentine people about the state of Tucumán. That northern province—the largest producer of sugar in the country, sustained through a centuries-old plantation regime—was promoted through glossy ads paid for by the government as part of its Operativo Tucumán (Tucumán Operation). The aim of the operation was to expand the province’s oligarchic structure by diversifying its production models, the result being that small sugar plantations were shut down and workers left unemployed. The government, however, concentrated its advertising on the beauty of the province and the happiness of its people, portraying it as a territory ripe for investment. The art collective traveled to Tucumán, researched the living conditions of its working-class inhabitants, collected data and photographs, and staged the exhibition. It lasted one week in Rosario and less than a day in Buenos Aires before being shut down.

Both the Happening para la participación total and Tucumán arde spoke to the impossibility of accessing truth or objective facts in the age of information. Photography was deeply implicated in these events, which effectively undid the medium’s long-held reputation as documentary proof beyond doubt.

CIRCA 1977

Between 1975 and 1977 a series of photography-centered exhibitions and publications appeared in Santiago, Chile. Given the recent military coup and the thousands of people detained and disappeared in the first months of the new regime, these exhibitions and publications received little, if any, attention. Yet in retrospect, they appear as both sign and symptom of
new critical vocabulary. Nineteen seventy-seven marked a peak in their engagement with the medium: In January of that year Juan Luis Martinez published *La nueva novela* (The new novel), a hand-printed artist’s book with an initial run of 500 copies made up almost entirely of photocopies, quotations, and collages from other printed media. In October, Galería Cromo published Carlos Altamirano’s book of photography, *Nueve relaciones inscritas en el paisaje urbano* (Nine relationships inscribed into the urban landscape). In October and November, Catalina Parra’s first solo show in Santiago, at the Galería Época, presented newspaper clippings, mainly obituaries, alongside photocopies of photographic reproductions of bodies undergoing medical treatment, hand-stitched pictures of bodies in pain, and other works fashioned from mechanically reproduced images. In November and December, Galería Cromo presented Carlos Leppe’s exhibition *Reconstitución de escena* (Reconstitution of a scene), in which photographs figured prominently as a way of undoing notions of origin and originality. And in December, Eugenio Dittborn exhibited eleven paintings and thirteen “graficaciones”—experimental prints made from photocopies of photographs printed in magazines and newspapers—in *Final de pista* at Galería Época (figs. 8–10).

Dittborn is a key artist in the exploration of mass-media sources. In 1979 the Chilean critic Ronald Kay wrote of Dittborn’s renderings of images of the bodies and lives of the “hapless” (“estos desventurados”) that “the photographic simile of their physical bodies contains what society rejects” (“el fotosímil de sus físicos contiene lo que la sociedad rechaza”). The images that became the matter of Dittborn’s practices and that of other artists portrayed those whose bodies and lives were socially and politically rejected, those who either stood in the way of progress or were critical of it. The title of Kay’s essay—“N.N.: autopsia (rudimentos teóricos para una visualidad marginal)” (N.N.: autopsy [theoretical elements for a marginal visuality])—speaks to the question of human disposability and anonymity that so preoccupied neo-avant-garde artists in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America. Their mass-media images are the photosensitive records of bodies that “barely survive, immortalized,” in Dittborn’s words. By collecting and reusing press photographs, Dittborn made visible the bodies and lives of those considered unworthy by the Chilean state—people characterized as criminals or categorized as racial inferiors precisely because they insisted on difference instead of assimilation. He thus rescued their bodies from permanent obscurity and unveiled photography’s relationship to forms of violence, surveillance, and control.

Parra’s *Imbunches* (1977; figs. 18–19) still stand as among the most significant artworks of the dictatorship years in Chile. Their “devastating critiques of violence, censorship and loss,” to use...
the words of Ana María Dopico, took forms “that the state’s official intelligence could not recognize or decode.” The imbunche is a being from Mapuche cosmology that has had all its bodily orifices sewn shut by “witches.” As Alessandro Fornazari has argued, the imbunche “becomes, in Parra’s oeuvre, a figure for the nightmarish modernity that is driven by the dictatorship and produces sutured, mutilated, and censored bodies in its wake.”

The imbunche provided the guiding metaphor for the works in Parra’s exhibition in Santiago, including Diario de vida (Diary of life; pl. 16). To make this work, Parra gathered a pile of copies of El Mercurio, Chile’s main newspaper, and sewed the ends of the folded newspapers together, compressed these bundles between transparent sheets of Plexiglas, and then ran screws through the construction, bolting it shut. As Nelly Richard has observed, Diario de vida “manipulated one of the symbols of official Chile (the daily newspaper El Mercurio) as a symbol of the distortions of meaning practiced in the context of the communicative monopoly of a unique obligatory truth that regulated the reading and interpretation of facts.”

THE UNDERSIDE OF THE MIRACLE

During the most repressive period of the military dictatorship in Brazil in the 1970s, artists invented visual forms of critique and subversion that at the time were unprecedented in that nation. Designed to elude censorship, these critiques were neither bombastic nor spectacular but subtle, mocking, and ironic. In a compelling new take on this era in Brazilian art, Elena Shtromberg has grouped these artistic practices around what she argues were four central systems associated with mass media, communications, and finance: currency, newspapers, television, and maps. In this way, she has traced a matrix of social exchanges into which artists inserted their work and discerned the invective these works aimed at official modes of commerce and communication. These four systems provided the networks that enabled the “texture of the social life” of art at the time.

The works these artists introduced into networks such as mail and copy services (the rise of the photocopier and fax machine in this decade is not inconsequential) often employed mass-produced photographic images, sometimes parodically, sometimes not. Cildo Meireles addressed currency production and circulation in Zero Cruzeiro (1974–78; pl. 25). Antonio Manuel appropriated and transformed mainstream newspapers in Repressão outra vez—eis o saldo (Repression again—this is the consequence; 1968; pl. 1), and De 0 a 24 horas (From 0 to 24 hours; 1970; pl. 12). Anna Bella Geiger appropriated, restaged, and “copied” postcards depicting indigenous people in Brasil nativo, Brasil alienígena (Native Brazil, alien Brazil; 1977; pl. 22). Sonia Andrade transformed studio portraits and postcards depicting sites in Brazilian cities into mail art in A obra/O espetáculo/Os caminhos/Os habitantes (The Work/The Spectacle/The Roads/The Inhabitants; 1977). In Brazil Today (1977; pl. 23) Regina Silveira used postcards depicting cities, landmarks, and indigenous people in Brazil that she bought at the Congonhas airport in São Paulo. Leticia Parente’s Projeto 158-1 and Projeto 158-2 (1975; pls. 34–35) and Recrutamento de pessoal (Personnel recruitment; 1975; pl. 36) mock official identification photographs, as do her undated self-portraits made with a Xerox machine in Xerox. All of these works employ mass-produced photographic reproductions that turned their subjects into commodities and mundane visual objects. In the hands of these artists, such degraded photographic images were remade into powerful critiques of Brazil’s repressive state apparatus and the “economic miracle” of the
Fig. 20  Estadio Azteca en Construcción, 1963, Oblique Series, Control Number FAO_01_017870, Aerophotographic Fund Historical Collection, Fundación ICA, A.C.

Fig. 21  Construction of the courtyard of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, designed by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez (Mexico, 1913–2013), 1963. Photo by Juan Guzmán (Mexico, b. Germany, 1911–2013). Courtesy Ramirez Vázquez y Associados, S.A. de C.V.
1970s, which paved the way for the neoliberal present. A number of these works concentrate on images of indigenous people and their extremely vulnerable place within the military government’s future-oriented project of progress.

The “miracle” alluded to in the title of this section denotes Brazil’s vertiginous economic growth between 1969 and 1974, a development the government was careful to advertise as its international face. In 1972 a reader of *The Economist* was informed that “Brazil is the most attractive country for foreign investors.” Yet this “miracle” coincided with the period of most severe censorship and repression during the twenty-year-long dictatorship, referred to as the *anos de chumbo* (lead years). While Brazil broadcast its emergence as “a global superpower,” inside the country basic rights, including freedom of expression, were in peril. On December 13, 1968, the government instituted a decree known as Ato Institucional Número Cinco (Institutional Act Number Five, or AI-5), which indefinitely suspended the legislature and in effect granted the president full powers. This allowed the regime’s plan to make Brazil an economic superpower to proceed unfettered, regardless of the cost to citizens and ecology. This progress-oriented ethos had first manifested itself in the audacious construction of Brasília.

As Shtromberg’s scholarship has shown, Brazil’s economic miracle depended in part on developing and integrating the Amazon region into the economy. A 1970 government initiative called the Plano de Integração Nacional (National Integration Plan) proposed mapping 2 million hectares of the Amazon using aerial photography, building two highways across the region, and establishing settlements along these routes. While departments charged with protecting indigenous peoples were established, Brazil’s minister of interior, José Costa Cavalcanti, made clear the government’s true priorities: “We will take all precautions with the Indians, but we will not allow them to hamper the advance of progress.” Today we understand that these plans have resulted in a despoilment of the Amazon rain forest so vast that it has shifted the planet’s ecology to a catastrophic and perhaps irreversible point. As a consequence, the habitats and ways of life of large numbers of indigenous people were destroyed.

These developments have inspired artistic responses by Meireles, Geiger, and Silveira, among others. They have worked to unmask the ways in which the government instrumentalized indigenous people, transforming them from humans to symbols. The government bulldozed (often literally) its way toward superpower status by destroying the life of the Amazon. Take Geiger’s work, for example: in the 1970s postcards of indigenous people in Amazonian environments proliferated in major cities throughout the country and were sold in mass quantities as souvenirs of “native Brazil.” Such images had first appeared in the nineteenth century, when the medium of photography became key to constructing a national identity, documenting Brazil’s tropical landscapes and organizing bodies into categories as a way to control the population. Postcards from the 1970s transformed the indigenous subject into a mere image, one that could be commercialized in mass quantities and released into the market as a commodity. In the context of the government’s Amazonian development projects, these postcards served as perverse advertisements for an economic (ad)venture that made little effort to hide its neocolonial underpinnings. The ethnographic gaze sustaining almost all nineteenth-century photographic production in Brazil (and elsewhere) is still present in postcards from the 1970s, yet lurking behind these “authentic” images is the destruction of the rain forest and the greed of capital. Geiger’s restaging of nine such postcards and displaying them with the originals drew attention to the rapid eradication of indigenous ways of life. Her works called out the forced smiles and performed happiness of the “natives” before the camera’s subjectifying gaze. In so doing she also paved the way toward understanding photography as a performative medium.

**FROM PRI TO NAFTA**

Works premised on mass-media photographs—like those of Cordeiro, Oiticica, González, Dittborn, and Geiger—are noticeably absent from Mexico’s art world of the late 1960s and the early to mid-1970s. Why? Had the Mexican Revolution (c. 1910–20) brought about such equality that one could not speak of the “hapless” there? Wasn’t progress attained on, through, and at the expense of bodies considered disposable? Wasn’t photography as a metaphor of (in)visibility applicable? Was Mexico so disconnected from the larger world that it was unaffected by the global circulation of images in the mid- and late twentieth century?

In fact, Mexico pursued many of the same sorts of projects South American nations did during the period: the construction of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico; UNAM) campus (1947–54; fig. 20); the erection of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (1964; fig. 21); and several gigantic housing projects, including Conjunto Urbano Nonoalco-Tlatelolco (1960–64), Villa Olímpica (1968), Unidad Habitacional La Patera (1969), and Unidad Habitacional El Rosario (1976). These residential complexes were touted as a partial solution to the pressing housing needs that plagued Mexico City at the time as well as the belated fulfillment of the revolution’s promises of equality. Meanwhile, the design and construction of the UNAM campus was a magnet for “attention from the press, in everything from daily newspapers to in-flight magazines,” as critic Barry Bergdoll writes. Progress, it would seem, is inseparable from visibility. And this visibility
has as its necessary opposite the invisibility into which the state cast events and people who threatened the supposed stability of its projects.

Ten days before the opening of the Mexico City Olympics in 1968, thousands of students gathered in peaceful protest in the city’s Tlatelolco section. The demonstration, echoing other protests worldwide, had been preceded by a series of rallies by students and workers criticizing the government for authoritarian practices, demanding autonomy for the university, and insisting on freedom for political prisoners. On October 2, state and military police forces crushed the protest in brutal fashion, killing hundreds of unarmed participants (the exact body count has never been determined). Mexican officials stifled coverage of the event, seizing as much visual (and aural) evidence of the massacre as they could, desperate to avoid any bad press that might threaten the gleaming image of progress and modernity it sought to present to the world, particularly during the Olympics. The immediate erasure of the state’s violence—including the cleansing of all traces of blood from the plaza itself—continues to haunt the politics, collective psyche, and aesthetic production of Mexico to this day. Importantly, this cover-up also resulted in an uncanny absence of photographs of the protest and ensuing police brutality in local media. As a result, the massacre lacks iconic images. The tragedy in Tlatelolco and the absence of related images offer a hint as to why so many writers and critics refer to the event as a specter or afterimage. “A specter is haunting Mexico. Our Lives. We are Tlatelolco,” wrote novelist José Revueltas after being incarcerated for his role in the student movement. An event erased by the media and denied by the state nonetheless lived on as an afterimage in millions of imaginations.

As the first attempts to write about the massacre emerged in the 1970s, critics turned to the trope of photographic representation, as Samuel Steinberg observed. There was, in short, a compulsive repetitive rewriting of the event as a photograph, despite the near lack of photographic documentation of the event. This is one way of understanding why Mexican or other Latin American artists at the time were not making use of images from the dark side of the Mexican nightmare of progress and development.

A number of art collectives emerged in Mexico in the 1970s in the wake of the 1968 massacre. Several dozen groups that used conceptual strategies, performance practices, research, and documentary techniques appeared invested in consistent institutional critiques. Grupo Proceso Pentágono and No Grupo produced some of the strongest denunciations of state violence during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Despite the multimedia approaches of these critiques, they never took on a systematic intervention of mass-media images.

CRITIQUES OF VISIBILITY

Since the advent of the digital age, the global flood of images has reached unimaginable levels. The digital image has become the world’s most widely used language. People speak in and through images today: the fact that Instagram, Snapchat, and many other feeds and social media platforms rely almost exclusively on images testifies to this. The image world went digital at a moment when vulnerability and precariousness rose drastically as a result of financial speculation; when market-driven states, debt-driven economies, and austerity measures became the norm; when political forms of public care and responsibility disappeared and populations were forced to pursue mass migration as the only means for survival. Images of these realities and their effect on human life circulate at an unprecedented speed through the press and through independent blogs, alternative news platforms, and social media. The globally connected inhabitants of the planet have constant and ever more invasive images of the lives of seemingly everyone. Yet visibility has not brought lasting change. Viral images like those of Santiago Maldonado, the Argentine activist disappeared on August 1, 2017, while supporting the indigenous Mapuche community in a claim to their ancestral lands in Patagonia, or of Omran Daqneesh, the Syrian child covered in dust and blood as he sat in an ambulance in Aleppo, or of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child whose body washed up on a Turkish beach, or of the forty-three students disappeared in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, have done little to resolve some of the ghastliest events of modern times.

Pictures of the horrible human cost of progress are now so pervasive that some artists who employ mass-media images no longer wish to make some realities more visible than others. As lives have become ever more disposable and images ever more difficult to avoid, some artistic experiments in Latin America have shifted toward making images themselves invisible—either through sheer overabundance and satiation or by outright erasure. The goal in either case is to make spectators aware of their consumption of images and their inability to “see” what matters in them. These artists question whether, in a world where nothing seems invisible and everything is overexposed, it is possible to see anything anymore.

In PM 2010 (2012; fig. 22, pl. 20) Mexican artist Teresa Margolles framed 313 front pages of PM, one of the most widely read tabloids in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and covered an entire wall with them at the 2012 Berlin Biennale. The piece was massive, measuring roughly twelve by eight meters. From afar it appeared as a sea of rectangular frames whose content was impossible to make out. At a closer distance it became evident that almost every single page features images of human bodies.
Another strategy for calling out the invisibility produced by excess has involved “blurring” or “removing” the images instead of visualizing their desensitizing pornographic overabundance. In Aliento (Breath; 1999; fig. 23, pl. 115) Colombian Oscar Muñoz uses grease to print photo-serigraphs from newspaper obituaries on steel disks; the disks appear blank unless the spectator breathes on them, activating the images and making the pictures visible. In the context of regional violence, it’s clear what those ephemeral, disappearing images refer to. In Jorge Julián Aristizábal’s Serie: PHOTO PRESS (Photo press series; 1997–2007; pls. 13–15) figures in newspaper photos are transformed into silhouettes, reduced to emptied-out containers; all that remain are shapes and outlines with no identification. The viewer then mentally remakes each photograph with the aid of the captions that have been left intact. In his memorial to the 111 men killed by police in a 1992 riot in the Carandiru prison in São Paulo, 111 Vigilia, Canto, Leitura (111 vigil, singing, reading; 2016; pl. 110), Brazilian Nuno Ramos chose not to draw on the images that had been all but unavoidable the year of the massacre and instead staged a twenty-four-hour performance in which the names of the deceased were read out loud. Immediately after the massacre, in October 1992, Ramos presented an installation that obscured the media’s hypervisualization of the dead bodies. His 2016 111 Vigilia, Canto, Leitura work returns to this earlier piece.

USES OF THE BODY

A persistent motif in this exhibition is how bodies are controlled, surveilled, and disciplined, specifically the uses to which photographic images are put in the constitution of subjects, citizens, and identities and the control of populations—what Foucault has theorized as the biopolitics at the heart of the art of governing bodies in modern times. Milagros de la Torre’s Bajo el sol negro, Cuzco, Peru (Under the black sun, Cuzco, Peru; 1993; fig. 24, pl. 33), Juan Pablo Langlois Vicuña’s Misses vestidas históricamente desnudas (Dressed women historically nude; 1990–95; pl. 26), and Oscar Farfán’s Depuración étnica (Ethnic cleansing; 2015; pl. 28) each elaborate a critique of the role photography has played in creating racial and gendered categories within nations. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national identities were forged in a variety of ways—state projects homogenizing multiracial societies, as in Mexico and Peru; efforts at cleansing, whitening, and educating native populations; the rise of modern scientific police approaches to deviancy, difference, and crime—and photography played a role in them all. Alongside this state-sanctioned use of the medium, the identity-granting potential that photographic portraiture offered was exploited by

corpses (victims of the so-called “drug war” shown tortured, stabbed, shot) placed alongside sexualized female bodies (often ads for prostitutes). Each front page is a horrific death-porn montage. In Berlin one of the rows in PM 2010 was not filled, suggesting that the composition is unfinished, the work open ended. Margolles’s work thus suggests that there are many more murders to come and many more women to consume: the grid is only growing. PM 2010 reveals the contradictions between the hypervisibility of horror and the visual anesthesia produced by mass media, making evident the desensitized contemporary subject and his or her inability to see. PM 2010 shares a number of characteristics with the works from the 1960s and 1970s discussed earlier, but it also brings to the fore an aspect that becomes prevalent in many more recent works here, namely the paradox of invisibility in a world dominated by digitally circulating images. By calling attention to the invisibility at the heart of the hypervisibility of violence in the Mexican mass media, PM 2010 ponders the value of life, the cost of corpses, and the lives of women consumed as objects through advertisement or prostitution for lack of other means of subsistence. None of those bodies or lives matter.
Fig. 23  Oscar Muñoz (Colombia, b. 1951), Installation view of Aliento (Breath), 1999. Photo-serigraph impression with grease on steel disk, each $7\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{8}$ in (18.11 x 18.11 x 18.11 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Gallery.

Fig. 24  Milagros de la Torre (Peru, b. 1965), Bajo el sol negro, Cuzco, Peru (Under the black sun, Cuzco, Peru), 1993. Gelatin silver print with Mercurochrome, $2\frac{3}{8} \times 1\frac{3}{4}$ in. (6.7 x 4 cm). Private collection.
studio and street photographers who made possible an array of fantasies and dreams of upward mobility and of racial passing to anyone able and willing to pay the price.

Anchored in the field of representation during its first century of existence, photography has been intimately linked to the creation of knowledge, law, and politics: these discourses have made extensive use of photography since its very beginning. It is a technology that reproduces bodies, divides them into those that belong and those that do not, those that are up to standard and bodies that are not. Ethnography and science documented race, ethnicity, type, and custom and offered only a few preselected fantasy backdrops and settings from which to choose. Starting in the 1860s police produced photographic portraits of people who had been taken into custody for everything from petty theft to serial killings and organized those bodies into types of criminals. Some of the most advanced scientists of the time believed that character traits—traits that would lead one to become a thief, a child molester, a serial killer, a vagabond—could be read on the body. In these uses of the photographic portrait, a hidden aspect of the bourgeois self becomes visible. It is, according to Allan Sekula’s reading, an instance in the portrait that operates according to an overt logic of repression. Criminal identification photographs were used to classify and also to identify targets and facilitate arrests. Photography, Sekula says, “unmasks the disguises, the alibis, the excuses and multiple biographies of those who find or place themselves on the wrong side of the law.”

Contemporary artists from the Americas have employed several strategies to question and subvert the hegemonic and historical biopolitical use of photography. One is the dark parodic re-creation of such racializing and policing apparatuses seen in works by de la Torre, Langlois Vicuña, and Farfán. In these Brechtian interventions, artists present satirical mise-en-scènes of images serving the institutional, colonizing, repressive project of the state, thus establishing a critical distance from their targets. Another approach involves a more experimental invasion of bodies rubbing against the camera lens, in the process becoming unidentifiable, and thus escaping and resisting this biopolitical function of photographic images. These works belong to the larger emerging artistic fields of body art and performance.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s artists made their own bodies the subject of their experiments with photography. Ana Mendieta (fig. 25, pls. 45–46), Hudinilson Jr. (fig. 26, pls. 47–49), Paulo Bruscky (pl. 51–53), and Claudio Perna (pl. 54) used their own bodies as material and object—pressing their bodies against photocopier machines; sculpting, deforming, and distorting themselves. The bodies that appear in their works cannot be contained or understood within the discourses of knowledge, law, and politics. Their bodies are illegible; they lose their shape as they are pressed on glass; they become monstrous. These are undisciplined bodies, visible as screaming, living flesh. The unreadable, sometimes grotesque bodies that appear in these artists’ self-portraits bring movement and dispersion into the photographic genre, leading it away from its well-mannered bourgeois uses and disturbing the portrait’s system of information. These images lead the photographic portrait into the arena of mistakes, errors, “bad copies,” “bad prints.” These bodies are shouting that they are alive, and that they are alive because they err, because they cannot be contained within parameters that allow for study and knowledge demanded by the technologies of the modern political world. Nor can these bodies enter—at least not easily—into the circulation of the market as beautiful bodies to be consumed through advertisement or as art. These bodies are monstrous not because they fail to conform to norms of visibility and subjectivity; they are monstrous because they are performing their way out of the prison of cleanly defined identities and subjectivities by collapsing the distance needed for observation and control. The works of these artists are experiments that take bodies beyond the disciplinary, controlling gaze of photography as a representative medium. Far from any science, their work is an attempt to rupture control and observation, to undo identities and subjectivities.

THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHMS

What can we learn from photography in the digital and screen age—especially given the difference between what analog photographs were and what today’s digital images are? In an era when power was articulated as the domain of a certain type of Western scientific knowledge, photographs were considered proofs of undeniable things. Photography was a type of knowledge that helped sustain control—of bodies and territories—through knowledge. As Catalan photographer and theoretician Joan Fontcuberta has put it, “What we commonly think of as photography only crystallized in the early nineteenth century, because it was precisely at that point in time that the technico-scientific culture of positivism required a process that could certify the empirical observation of nature. The advent of the camera is thus linked to notions of objectivity, truth, identity, memory, document, archive and so on.”

Digital images are dematerialized insofar as they do not need to be printed on any substrate; they are immediate, offering instantaneous viewing, since there is virtually no delay between the click of the algorithmic composition of the image and its appearance on a screen-like surface that makes it visible. Digital images are also deterritorialized, since they are no longer attached to or
grounded by their referents and instead are seemingly everywhere. They are fictions, “pure data, content without physical matter, an image without a body,” open as never before to hybridity given their detachment from regimes of truth, objectivity, and knowledge of the world. Fontcuberta has argued that given these differences, we should not call today’s digital images photographs at all and instead make up a new name for them. He suggests “figurative infographics” and “digital realist painting” as two tongue-in-cheek possibilities for the name of what is essentially a new medium.

Graphic information stored as a numeric array, waiting to be translated—opened and read—into a support that offers the code and data as a form of visuality: that is what digital images are. This transition from physical object to dematerialized images derived from coded data, and from regimes of visibility to systems of information through the rise of the Internet and computer technology, has increased to an unimaginable level the volume and speed of circulation of images. The surfeit of images that surround us, that we interact with, that we immediately react to through likes and shares, that overwhelm us on a daily basis, has made us, as Fontcuberta says, blind “from so much looking we no longer see anything: the excess of seeing leads to blindness from saturation. . . . Now information blinds knowledge.”

Artists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fought to make photographs seen and displayed as aesthetic objects—as simply art—and struggled against the reduction of the medium to an exclusively or primarily scientific tool. So, asking if there is anything we can learn from digital images requires us to narrow our definition of image production: both analog photographs and digital images are expected, implicitly or explicitly, to offer information and knowledge. What does the image show? Is there a resemblance between the captured image and the subject of that image? We demand that photographs and their digital counterparts hold and offer something of the world; that they deliver, in the form of pictures, part of the world; that they turn the world into an image. This is information. This is knowledge.

Over the last decade a number of artists have explored the materiality of technologically produced images, digital and nondigital, thereby questioning photography as an art of representation. Digital images have transformed photography: these pictures are no longer indexically connected to the world; they no longer carry traces of the world made by light. Digital images have become unhinged from their referent, as William J. Mitchell said, and are now just bits of data. Digital images do not even need to originate in the world, as there are now many types of digital images that are images of digital matter, such as screenshots. Their mass circulation over the Internet has finalized this separation. This technological and ontological transformation has freed photographic images from the framework of representation and replaced it with information and data. This is the new raw matter of photography, the new body and materiality of digitally produced and reproduced images. A number of the most recent works in this exhibition, such as the corrupted files of Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck (pls. 106–07) or Fernando Velázquez’s mediascapes (pl. 108), speak to the disintegration of what was once known as the photographic image after it is produced by the composition of algorithmic logic. This work undoes the structure of representation that had been fundamental to the practice of photography, both within and outside the art world.

By the time this book is printed and circulating, we will know which team won Google’s LunarX Prize: a $20 million award going to the first privately funded group that lands an unmanned rover on the moon, navigates 500 meters there, and beams images and video back to Earth. The craft must be launched before December 31, 2017. Fifty years ago, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a spectacular race to the moon, and the photographs then taken became some of the most widely circulated press images of the 1960s. That initial imagining and imaging the human in outer space was heavily marked by nation-states. Today’s most recent “sprint to space” still appeals to national prestige—will the Indian team win, or will it be one of the three US teams?—but clearly belongs to a different moment since the most crucial parameter is that the teams be privately funded. The race has become a question of how money will be made exploiting space and by whom. In 2016 the space industry generated $250 billion in revenue. In order to reach the point of profit making, are images needed? How will today’s space industry transform the photographic family of images, those that once offered the world in pictures and then generated the possibility of creating pictures and worlds by transforming images into data? The $20 million prize comes with a bonus, which might be an indicator that we are uncannily returning to a moment when humans need proofs. If the rover can visit and transmit from a historic lunar site, the team will receive an additional $1 to $4 million; traveling five kilometers will bump up the prize by another $2 million; surviving and transmitting images and video from the moon over two whole days is a further $2 million; and providing proof of the presence of water, yet another $4 million. It seems as if these lunar crafts are this century’s version of the naturalist-traveler—the people, 200 years ago, who were among the first to experiment with the medium of photography: adventurous scientists exploring and documenting this planet as a new world order emerged in the nineteenth century. The LunarX robots, transmitting postphotographic images from the moon, are our new mad scientists.
Fig. 25  Ana Mendieta (United States, b. Cuba, 1948–1985), detail of *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, 1972. One of six estate color photographs, each 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm). The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Fig. 26  Hudinilson Jr. (Brazil, 1957–2013), *Untitled*, 1980s. Collage, photocopy on paper, 9 7/8 x 8 1/8 in. (25 x 22 cm). Courtesy Galeria Jaqueline Martins.
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH PHOTOGRAPHY?


2 Ibid., 65–68.

3 Quoted from the Guggenheim Museum’s web page for Roni Horn’s Gold Field, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/14665. The museum now owns the piece.


11 The use of the term in the 1960s has mistakenly been attributed to Lucy Lippard and John Chandler’s “The Dematerialization of Art” in February 1968 in Art International.

12 “La ‘materia’ (‘inmaterial’, ‘invisible’) con la que se construyen obras informacionales de tal tipo no es otra que los procesos, los resultados, los hechos y/o los fenómenos de la información desencadenada por los medios de información masiva (Ej. de ‘medios’: la radio, la televisión, los diarios, los periódicos, las revistas, los afiches, los ‘pannels’, ‘la historia, etcétera.” Oscar Masotta, “Después del Pop nosotros desmaterializamos,” in Revolución en el arte: pop art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del sesenta (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2004), 350.

13 See Nelly Richard’s books Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile after 1973 (Melbourne: Art & Text, 1986); La estratificación de los márgenes (Santiago de Chile: Francisco Zegers; and Melbourne: Art & Text, 1989); and La insubordinación de los signos: cambio político, transformaciones culturales y políticas de la crisis (Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1994) for the definition of the Escena de avanzada, analysis of this group of artists, and theoretical intervention into the debate of art and politics in Chile under dictatorship.


15 Ronald Kay, Del espacio de acá: Señales para una mirada americana (Santiago: Edicionesnómade, 2009), 50. This quote originally appeared in a text written for a 1979 exhibition in Buenos Aires.


18 Nelly Richard, Masculino/Femenino: prácticas de la diferencia y cultura democrática (Santiago: Francisco Zegers Editor, 1993), 51.


20 Quoted in Shtroumb, Art Systems, 30.

21 The first Brazilian department established to aid indigenous peoples was the Servicio de Proteción ao Indio (Indian Protection Service), founded in 1910 and disbanded in the mid-1960s after it became known that employees were accomplices in massacres orchestrated by landowners. The second was the Fundação Nacional do Indio (National Indian Foundation) established in 1967 by the military regime and, for many intellectuals and artists, another institution committed to destruction in the name of civilization, given the government’s exploitation of the region.

22 Quoted in Shtroumb, Art Systems, 23.


25 See Steinberg, Photopoetics at Tlatelolco.

26 Visibility has brought about temporary interventions, such as the reaction that the Guantánamo photographs generated.

27 PM 2010 consisted of front pages Margolles collected during the course of 2010, when PM reported a total of 3,075 murders, not all the result of the drug war. Thus, the 313 frames of PM 2010 represent barely 10 percent of the murders that took place in Ciudad Juárez in 2010, the most violent year between 2006 and 2012 in Mexico’s drug war, with 2,500 executions in Ciudad Juárez alone. Estimates of the total number of deaths resulting from the drug war and government corruption over the past two decades vary, but many sources suggest that around 100,000 people have been killed or gone missing in the last fifteen years in Mexico.
A poster consisting of a miniature version of *PM 2010*, a grid of 24 instead of 313 front pages, was made available to visitors at the Berlin Biennale. By 2012 Margolles was well known on the international art circuit, especially when the venue focused on the relationship between art and politics, as did the 2010 Berlin Biennale. The Mexican Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale had featured her work. Like *PM 2010*, those works focused on the way in which bodies had become disposable in the violent environment of Mexico.

Immediately after the massacre, in October 1992, Ramos presented an installation that obscured the media’s hypervisualization of the dead bodies.

Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 7. In a February 1978 seminar on security, territory, and population, French philosopher Michel Foucault lectured on the “art of governing” and proposed that the behavior and life conditions of a population in late modernity were highly managed by the state, with its juridical and disciplinary instances; by the police, through its ever-growing powers invested in normativity; and by the technologies of subjectification and control that were multiplying everywhere. The body is disciplined and made productive and economically useful through work, education, and the army. This in turn creates a more effective population. This effective and productive population can then be more easily regulated. This discipline, control, and regulation shapes bodies and insists on identities, because identities can be closely monitored, managed, and tagged as productive or unproductive.


Mexican American artist Leo Villareal uses computer programming to produce patterns of light that look uncannily similar to particle systems and cellular life forms: “ambiguously organic crystalline forms” as an early review of his work observed. According to the artist himself, “the visual manifestation of code in light” stands at the core of his aesthetic project. Villareal manipulates light through complex algorithms that he either writes himself or develops with the help of others. These algorithms are designed to allow patterns simulating particles and particle fields to iterate in endless, trance-inducing loops. Yet the programs also include loopholes that allow the code to self-generate its own patterns. The initial programmed shapes morph into unexpected arrangements, forms, and sequences, giving light a life of its own. Light is sequenced by code, but the code surpasses its own limits and allows for improvised new formations to emerge. The programmed patterns and their unexpected mutations approximate what science has shown through experiments and optical devices—microscopes and telescopes, for example—to be the very stuff of the universe. Villareal takes inanimate material and processes, such as computer code, algorithms, and sequential patterns of computer language, and gives them life. Today’s most novel symbolic language—code—becomes animate.

Villareal’s work is not, strictly speaking, of the photographic family. It does not adhere to any of the medium’s technical manifestations as developed over the course of the last 150 years, from early daguerreotypes, heliographs, and photogenic drawings to present-day digital images. But his most recent work shares with photography two fundamental elements: light and time. Analog photographs are the visual manifestation—record, inscription, or imprint—of light that has bounced off an object or body for a specific period of time. A photograph can be overexposed if light is recorded for an excessive amount of time or underexposed if the light bouncing off the object or body does so for too brief a moment. Villareal’s sculptures and installations generate patterns in the form of light that mimic the natural world at its most elemental. He writes code to unveil shapes that simulate physical matter in its most irreducible state. In this sense, Villareal’s work is protophotographic, occupied and preoccupied with the basic ingredients of photography for more than a century.

His work parallels photography in the way in which it navigates, with equal attention to each, the opposing forces of reason (science) and creativity (aesthetics). Since its emergence, photography has negotiated a dual nature as both scientific experiment and aesthetic object. Developments in chemistry and optics first enabled the recording of light and shadow. Today, advances in computer graphics and software have given birth to a vast array of digital images made by human and nonhuman means. Like the earliest of photographs, Villareal’s work revels in the unresolved tension between science and art as machines, technology, and science bring the natural world closer to the human. In the nineteenth century, as the world became increasingly secular and logic driven and as humans lost their millennia-old relationship to nature as a force of magic and wonder, photography seemed miraculous. The medium fixed on a tangible surface a reflection of the world that, in its perfect likeness, amazed the public at large. Photography, despite its roots in scientific inquiry, opened up the possibility of a reenchantment with the world in the disenchanted era of late modernity. In today’s cyborg era, scientific experiments (now involving computer science) once again return the magic and wonder of nature to the world of images. To experience Villareal’s latest computer-generated light patterns is to once again feel something of nature’s sublimity.

The son of a Mexican father and a mother from the United States, Villareal was born in Albuquerque and grew up moving between the border towns of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. He studied sculpture and theater as an undergraduate at Yale University in the late 1980s, and in 1992 he enrolled in a master’s program in interactive telecommunications at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. There he studied programming, computer graphics, and other aspects of the emergent computing world. Villareal then spent two years living in the San Francisco Bay Area, working at Interval Research, a technology think tank, where he was part of a groundbreaking virtual reality experiment that involved converting 16mm footage of a forest into computer data to “understand what a realistic experience of place could be.”
He returned to New York in the late 1990s to teach at NYU, and it was then that he began participating in the art world, showing early light sculptures in group exhibitions. By 2000 Villareal was working exclusively with light. First, he encased LEDs in cylindrical tubes, using software to sequence the lights, and he eventually moved on to multichannel digital projections that translate his customized software into visible mutating shapes built from light.

Recently, Villareal has moved beyond LED bulbs. His Particle Field 2 (2017; fig. 2, pl. 132) and Particle Chamber (2017: fig. 1) are digital projections, quasi-cinematic immersive experiences created by programmed light sequences and patterns. The works suggest an adaptation of Villareal’s early experiments in virtual reality to unleash and bring to life the most basic particles of matter. Particle Chamber is a site-specific installation devised for the artist’s first solo show at Pace Gallery, New York, one of the most highly respected galleries for modernist photography in the United States. A press release for the exhibition invited viewers to “stop and contemplate the celestial imagery before them.” Villareal’s works transformed the gallery’s “plain white cube . . . into a cave sparkling with ethereal light,” as one review put it. Celestial imagery and ethereal light: the words used to describe Villareal’s recent works are both scientific and religious in nature, at once physical and metaphysical.

The astonishment of commentators on the exhibition was spurred by a remarkably intricate installation. They entered a dark room with six screens arranged in a semicircle. Tiny particle-like specks of white light made their way across the screens. The patterns that emerged were both repetitive and unexpected, creating a music-like visual rhythm. This immersive experience created a mesmerizing sense of floating in the sky or of being thrown into a blinding dust storm or of studying microscopic bits of matter that constitute the universe—that is, if one were able to see such particles shining down from the pitch-black cosmos. This cosmos is wholly conceived...
and presented by Villareal; it is not a reflection of the existing universe, as would be the case were these images photographic or cinematic. Despite their approximation of elements of the natural world, these particles were created by Villareal.

In the 1830s experiments with what came to be called photography were taking place independently in Brazil, England, France, and elsewhere. One of the pioneers working in this field, William Henry Fox Talbot, wrote to his partner, Sir John Herschel, in March 1839 describing his experiments as “words of light.” A few days later, addressing the Royal Society of London, Herschel referred to their invention as “photography”—a word formed from the Greek words for “writing with light.” Herschel’s presentation was titled “Notes on the Art of Photography, or the Application of Chemical Light Rays for the Purpose of Pictorial Representation.” Thus, the notion of writing with light was established at the medium’s conception. Words and writing are not mirror images of the world; they are highly abstract forms of symbolic creation. Nonetheless, the medium’s capacity to offer scientifically faithful representations of the world that exists before the camera has ensured that its life would be inextricable from pictorial aims—from the act of representation as opposed to creation. Leo Villareal’s light works revivify one of photography’s earliest premises: the idea of writing with light, of creating a new world rather than reproducing that which already exists. His code, a minuscule subset in today’s computer-centered lingua franca, writes light’s shape. Rather than capturing natural light bouncing off bodies and objects in the world, Villareal creates new worlds that deliver to his audiences a renewed sense of wonder.

—NATALIA BRIZUELA

3 JoAnne Northrup, “Animating Light,” in Leo Villareal (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz; San Jose, CA: San Jose Museum of Art, 2010), 22.
Leo Villareal (United States, b. 1967), *Particle Field 2*, 2017. OLED monitor, electrical hardware, and custom software, 57 x 32½ x 4¾ in. (144.8 x 82.6 x 11.4 cm). Courtesy Pace Gallery.
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