

SABOTAGE

ART

POLITICS AND
ICONOCLASM

IN
CONTEMPORARY
LATIN
AMERICA



EDITED BY
SOPHIE HALART AND
MARA POLGOVSKY EZCURRA

B L O O M S B U R Y

Sophie Halart and **Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra** are both specialists in modern and contemporary Latin American art, visual culture, and literature.

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'Nelly Richard once commented on the difficulty of reading the politics of Latin American contemporary art abroad without reducing the works to a testimonial function or, alternatively, stripping them of their incisive concreteness. This wonderful collection speaks to the emergence of a critical discourse on Latin American art that manages to hold form and politics not just in the balance but to read one through the other: a truly groundbreaking achievement.'

**Jens Andermann, Professor of Latin American
Studies, University of Zurich**

'Sabotage Art: Politics and Iconoclasm in Contemporary Latin America provides a welcome shift of emphasis amidst perennial redefinitions of "political art" in Latin America. Framing sabotage as a "positional choice with regard to the institution" allows Halart, Polgovsky Ezcurra and their collaborators to critically interrogate the longstanding association of Latin American art with struggle or "adversity" for both historical case studies and the market delirium over "contemporary art". This book makes for an excellent teaching resource on overlooked artists such as Paulo Bruscky, Enrique Guzmán, Marcos Kurtycz, and Edgardo Antonio Vigo, offers fresh examinations of canonized avant-gardes in Argentina and Chile, and considers recent participatory projects in Bogotá and Mexico City. Yet it is most valuable in the sum total of its discrete chapters, which together demonstrate a range of new methods for a field now hitting its stride.'

**Daniel Quiles, Assistant Professor, Department of Art History, Theory
and Criticism, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago**

SABOTAGE ART

POLITICS AND ICONOCLASM IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

EDITED BY

SOPHIE HALART AND MARA POLGOVSKY EZCURRA

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Introduction

Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra and Sophie Halart

In 2009, at the Venice Art Biennale Cuban artist Tania Bruguera performed *Self-Sabotage*, a work that combined the putative risk of her spectacular suicide with a defence of artistic practice as a politics of survival. Sitting at a desk, facing her audience, Bruguera completed three rounds of Russian roulette while reading a text that addressed what she considered to be the political responsibilities of the contemporary artist.¹ Responding to growing nervousness among those present in the pavilion, the curators eventually intervened to put an end to the performance, leaving the artist just enough time to conclude with one last – loaded – shot into the air. Playing with risk, exposing her vulnerability and provoking the expectant public, Bruguera's performance entailed a sense of radical danger in which artist and audience became ethically bound together. The latter might have been compelled to abandon the posture of 'innocent bystander' (Ward 2012) and interrupt the artist's perilous act, yet this invitation was accompanied by coercion. During the act Bruguera also called upon other artists to embrace the joint exploration of risk, politics, art and ethics, challenging them to leave their 'comfortable positions' and adopt 'a place that is not self-nostalgic, [...] an insecure place, [...] a place where art is not an important concept' (2009).

While Bruguera's performance constitutes a summons to contemporary artists and audiences, it also evokes some of the complexities and tensions accompanying the deployment of 'sabotage' and 'self-sabotage' strategies in Latin American art from the 1960s until the present. During these years, the iconoclastic agenda of avant-garde artists revealed the critical possibilities resulting from an understanding of art as sabotage, in which public gestures of institutional and political resistance became entwined with intimate forms of self-undoing. Performed at one of the most canonical events of the contemporary art world, however, Bruguera's intervention also raises significant questions regarding the institutional recuperation of violence as entertainment and 'risky' spectacle. A critical analysis of the diverse developments of sabotage strategies in recent Latin American art is therefore in order, especially considering that the notions of 'sabotage' and 'Latin America' invoke a complex web of historical and conceptual debates. This book seeks to engage with these discussions, situating both terms in relation to specific artistic practices.

Hailing from the French noun 'sabot' (clog or wooden shoe), the early uses of the word sabotage were associated with dissent, connoting the disturbing noises produced by the banging or stomping of *sabots* during official speeches.² It was not until the twentieth century, however, that the term was adopted in several languages to refer to the 'damaging or destruction of an employer's property by workmen during a strike' or, more generally, 'any disabling damage deliberately inflicted, especially that carried out clandestinely in order to disrupt the economic or military resources of an enemy' (OED online, 2014). Beyond these industrial and military usages, sabotage became associated with gestures seeking to interrupt flows of production via either active participation or concerted inaction, often under conditions of anonymity.³ Indeed, the word *saboteur* may well describe the quintessential anti-hero posture: away from the well-trodden fields of fame and praise awaiting the return of the revered individual hero, the saboteur remains largely unnamed, operating undercover, within the meshes, wires and tunnels of the system. This anonymity also constitutes the saboteur's strategic advantage, since his or her actions tend to intervene at the lowest levels of the productive chain, enabled by 'the discovery that a relatively minor malfunction, mistiming or interruption, introduced at the right place and moment, could [...] have widespread effects' (Mitchell

2011, 22–23). Yet embracing destruction as a strategy of resistance is never entirely risk-free for its instigator, and the violence associated with sabotage also functions as a double-edged sword: as in Bruguera's performance, sabotage inhabits the antithetical gestures of destruction and production, self-undoing and self-affirmation.

In the artistic field, sabotage strategies assault those systems of representation that constitute the canon at a given time and place. This often takes the form of an attack against the very materiality of the image, situating sabotage within a history of iconoclasm. Seen in this light, it is important to underline that while iconoclasts often call forth epithets such as 'vandals,' 'obscurantists' and 'nihilists,' destruction in art is closely intertwined with processes of construction (of meaning, value and social representations), to the point that iconophilia and iconoclasm are 'not only inseparable but also sometimes indistinguishable' (Gamboni 2002, 88). The very history of preservation involves processes of defacement, removal, breaking, substitution and transformation, while the reverse may also be said with regard to the proliferation of images that often follows upon the heels of iconoclastic impulses. In this regard, Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders argue that:

Destruction is not the end of culture but one of the conditions of its possibility. Destruction *is* cultural activity, and also, at times, religious activity. The destruction of objects produces new meanings and practices, and damaged things may become more precious. (2007, 17, original emphasis)

Along these lines, art historian Dario Gamboni posits that during the modern period in the West, the prohibition and condemnation of the 'wilful destruction of art' were foundational to the emergence of the notion of 'artistic autonomy' and its corollary, the ostensibly 'inherent' value of art, as well as to the entire web of institutional relations that sustains both concepts (1997, 17). Yet while these developments entailed a drastic removal of art from everyday use, they did not bring the history of iconoclasm to a close. On the contrary, they led to an opening up of the category, and in some contexts to its positive transvaluation. In this sense, iconoclasm became one of the driving forces of art historiography, prompting historians and critics to understand new artistic movements as responding to previous traditions by means of negation, destruction or

obliteration. Likewise, within the realm of artistic production, iconoclasm became a tradition in its own right, inaugurated in the early twentieth century with the rejection of artistic convention among the avant-gardes and the ‘anti-modernist “vandalism”’ acting in the name of art that followed (Gamboni 1997, 286).

Given the diversity of intentions, methods and meanings that participate in the dialectic of production and destruction of artworks, some scholars have argued that ‘there can be no useful meta-history of iconoclasm’, and each attempt to understand this seemingly destructive relationship to objects – sacred, aesthetic or everyday – must be historically and culturally situated (Boldrick 2007, 4). In this volume, we locate the practices of sabotage and iconoclasm within the temporal and cultural context of post-1960s Latin America. However, throughout this endeavour, we also understand ‘Latin America’ as a complex and heterogeneous concept that, like sabotage, evades attempts to situate it within any fixed semantic frame. In recent decades, many voices – including those of artists, historians and art critics – have risen against an unproblematic deployment of the concept of Latin America, highlighting the simplification and generalization that this term leads to when applied uncritically to a region composed of profoundly diverse peoples, languages and histories. Gerardo Mosquera is one of many to point out that the very notion of Latin America has always been highly ambiguous, if not arbitrary. It remains unclear, for instance, whether its scope includes ‘the Dutch and Anglo Caribbean’, ‘the 40 million people of Hispanic origin living in the [United] States’ or ‘indigenous peoples who do not speak European languages’ (2010, 18). As a synthesizing notion, linked to a presumed *Latinidad*, whose meaning remains elusive beyond its relationship to the Latin origins of Spanish and Portuguese (Mignolo 2005, 79), an uncritical use of the term ‘Latin America’ suffers from an insufficient assessment of regional differences, inequalities and conflicts, which may create a false image of cultural homogeneity and social integration. Nevertheless, beyond the need to consider those conflicts and tensions that are inherent to the ‘idea’ of Latin America, it is also important to note how this notion fulfils functions that surpass a simplistic division of the world into cultural regions. The conception of a ‘Latin American self’ may be seen as a form of ‘strategic essentialism’ – to use Gayatri Spivak’s term (1996 [1985],

204) – closely intertwined with a history of colonialism (Mosquera 2010, 19). These essentialist ‘identities of resistance’ may potentially create space for dialogue and community, where common struggles become platforms for new propositions and forms of enunciation (19). As Puerto Rican curator Mari Carmén Ramírez writes, art practices in Latin American are bred as both strategies of resistance ‘in the face of adversity’ as well as constructive and self-affirming methods following ‘a socioartistic project of emancipation – that is, a project in which the creation of new art forms would go hand in hand with the hypothetical transformations of everyday life and the construction of an alternative society’ (2004, 433).⁴

The texts that comprise this volume share a concern for the difficult position that results from writing from and about Latin America as a given construct, remaining especially aware of the specious traps lurking behind unproblematic generalization. The decision to focus on specific case studies within national scenes attends to this preoccupation, as does the inclusion of contributions that reflect critically on the ‘question’ of Latin America as a general category – or even a trend – in contemporary art, especially with regard to its application on the global art scene. While the chapters are not organized chronologically, which would lend itself to their linear insertion into a grand narrative, the book’s partition into two sections provides a sense of temporal shift, as it addresses questions that arise from the increasing globalization and financialization of art over the past half-century.

The first section, entitled ‘Material Sabotage: Ensnaring, Burning, Trespassing’, examines artworks conceived of as sabotage strategies, each chapter providing a critical insight into specific artists or media. In Chapter One Catherine Spencer offers a provocative re-reading of Argentine artist Marta Minujín (b. 1943), establishing a co-dependency and dialogue between the destructive orientation of her early career and her later embrace of pop and hippie counter-culture. Analysing an ample range of the artist’s installations and performances, Spencer entangles their sabotaging and self-sabotaging dimensions, drawing attention to the relationships between obliteration and subjectivation as processes which are simultaneously destructive, immersive and self-empowering. For Spencer, Minujín’s sculptures, installations and *happenings* open a carnivalesque space that does not limit itself to the creation of transient escape routes but draws the possibility of carving out new modes of intervention in the social. In

Chapter Two Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra revisits the relationship between ritual, violence and (self-)exposure by examining the Polish-Mexican artist Marcos Kurtycz's (1934–96) early live performance entitled *Potlatch* (1979), in which he broke into an art gallery and publicly destroyed one of his own paintings with acid. This practice of tearing a painting apart in public, grounded in Georges Bataille's notion of ritual 'expenditure', opens up questions of aesthetic and material value in a heavily iconophilic context. A forceful attack on the Mexican art institution – with its authoritarian and nationalist leanings – Kurtycz's use of violence partakes, however, in a mirroring dynamic whereby the attack against the institution unfolds into an assault on his own creations and persona (thus exploring the paradoxical mechanisms through which sabotage and self-destruction, critique and self-affirmation, presence and self-erasure, may become entangled). Linked to Kurtycz's by its tactile and seemingly sacrificial transgression of boundaries, the work of the Mexican painter Enrique Guzmán (1952–86) is the topic of Chapter Three by Erica Segre. Segre places Guzmán's 'ironic and dissective' figuration in tension with his own epoch, marked by the increased use of non-conventional media in the face of the state's nationalist control of traditional artistic processes. Guzmán's abrasive pictorial motifs, turned into emblems of personal ambivalence, would also come to feature years later in the (self-)desecrating paintings and performances of Mexican artist and gay rights activist Nahum B. Zenil (b. 1947). In this regard, Segre understands what she calls Guzmán's 'poetics of the razor blade' as a pictorial disassembly of nationalist iconicity. Also targeting the nation-state's over-reliance on rigid patriotic referents, in Chapter 4, the last of this section, Zanna Gilbert questions the ways in which the practice of mail art in Latin America might be conceived of as an attempt to sabotage the rigid and 'stuffy' logic of authoritarian bureaucracies. Looking into the works of Felipe Ehrenberg (b. 1943, Mexico), Paulo Bruscky (b. 1949, Brazil) and Edgardo Vigo (1928–97, Argentina), Gilbert turns austere readings of sabotage on their heads, arguing that these artists' interventions often resorted to humour, trickery and stealth as strategies to exploit loopholes in official regulations and resist bureaucratic power's control over the everyday. Ultimately, Gilbert's text suggests that, besides constituting an action with a specific target, sabotage might also be conceived of as a shift in scale, a blowing out of dimensions that seeks to undo the monotony of normative guidelines.

The second section of the book offers a series of discussions examining artistic practices in relation to the discourses that have been produced around them by art institutions, the state and the art market. Coming together under the heading 'Cannons and Canons: Explosive vs. Implosive Postures', these contributions explore the tensions and ambivalences framing the relationship between artworks, their institutional display and the place they have come to occupy in the historiographic canon. This second axis of reflection also investigates the persistence of sabotage in the after-life of a work's immediate contemporaneity. The so-called 'boom' of international interest in Latin American art over the past decade is visible in the exhibition programmes of established metropolitan museums as well as in the increase in academic research on this topic in Europe and the United States. However, while this new status opens artworks and artists to new audiences, a discussion addressing the institutionalization and mystification of Latin American art by academic and curatorial discourses is also in order. Understanding sabotage as a form of noise-making, in Chapter Five, Sophie Halart offers an interpretation of neo-avant-garde practices in Argentina and Chile as actions that sought to destabilize the transmission and intelligibility of official discourses. Through a study of selected works by the 1960s Argentine group Arte de los Medios and the 1970s Chilean collective Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA), Halart argues that their strength lay in conceiving of sabotage as a form of acoustic interference that could open the way for a return to more dialogic forms of social exchange. Halart also questions the legacy – and ongoing subversive potential – of these strategies in the face of their insertion into conceptualist categories and the turn to the 'global' in contemporary art. Along similar lines, in Chapter Six Natasha Adamou addresses the participation of Mexican contemporary artist Gabriel Orozco in the 1993 edition of the Venice Biennale with the works *Empty Shoe Box* (1993) and *Yielding Stone* (1992). In their status as everyday, almost unperceivable objects, these works were conceived to undermine this spectacular art event but ended up being rapidly consecrated and incorporated into the logic of the institution. Adamou's chapter interrogates the tensions that arise when an artwork's material conditions make it resistant to traditional modes of display. Her reading situates Orozco's work in relation to Duchamp's 'readymade' and André Breton's 'found object', questioning in light of these concepts Orozco's investigation

of the tensions between object and sculpture, reality and representation. Also dealing with the relationship between local artistic practices and global art institutions, in Chapter Seven Olga Fernández López discusses the collaborative project *El Museo de la Calle* that took place in Bogotá in the late 1990s. Replicating the constant flows of bartering that used to characterize the now demolished working-class neighbourhood of El Cartucho, Fernández López interprets the project as an anthropological investigation into the ‘transvaluation’ effect that art might have on everyday objects. This in-depth case study suggests that *El Museo de la Calle* effectively constituted a sabotage of both ‘the circulation of commodities and the stability of the museum institution’. Nevertheless, Fernández López also questions the legacy of this critical agenda once the project entered the circuit of international exhibitions. Ultimately, she evaluates the challenges associated with the decontextualized presentation of a site-specific project in the global art scene and dwells on whether there might be a right way to portray economic precariousness without rendering misery as a spectacle. Also addressing the Colombian contemporary scene, Carla Macchiavello’s chapter analyses the multifarious senses in which the notion of ‘risk’ might be advanced in relation to Colombia’s tourist economy, trapped by its attempts to veil violence. Macchiavello contrasts governmental campaigns promising foreign visitors an experience of raw authenticity with the work of contemporary artist Elkin Calderón, who re-situates risk in an everyday context of violence and social marginality. Macchiavello also revisits Calderón’s participation in the 2013 Bogotá-based edition of *La Otra Bienal*, questioning the potential and limitations of artistic activism, understood as a strategy that endorses antagonism and conflict as productive forms of exchange. The last chapter concludes our exploration of sabotage in contemporary Latin American art with a timely reflection on shifting forms of collective mobilization that intertwine art and politics in a search to resignify and materially appropriate public space. Starting with a discussion of Mexico’s recent mass protests in the aftermath of the disappearance and suspected murder of a group of 43 students from a rural teacher-training school in Ayotzinapa on 26 September 2014, Robin Greeley suggests that the ‘synergetic relationship’ between the use of digital media and the corporeal presence of people in the streets during public protests could be read as a ‘sabotage riposte’