

A Modular Framework: Beyond Tautological History
Essay written for the exhibition A Modular Framework
CCESV, El Salvador
November 9 –December 17, 2010.
by Eduardo Navas

Note: This essay was written for the exhibition A Modular Framework, which took place at the Cultural Center of Spain in El Salvador, November 9 – December 17, 2010. The catalog was never published due to limitation of funds. I considered publishing this essay in art journals focused on Latin American Art, but the response by some was that it was either too specific and could not fit their specific theme at the moment, or that it read too much like an exhibition catalog essay which would not sit well outside of the context for which it was originally written. It has been nearly five years since I wrote the text, and I have decided to release it online, as part of my general research shared on Remix Theory. I am doing this because I believe that it is fair for the artists who participated in the exhibition to have access to the writing I produced. I also think that what I write in terms of critical theory and postcolonial studies may be of interest to people invested in Latin American Art.

Some of the issues raised in terms of the history of new media and Latin America may have changed since I wrote the essay in 2010. I leave it unchanged because I don't see the point in updating the cultural context given that the exhibit was curated to reflect on the issues at play in 2010.

A Modular Framework is an exhibition that brings together artists from Latin America, or artists who have ties to Latin America, and have been producing new media work since at least the mid-nineties, when new media and digital art began to take shape. Most of the works included in the exhibition are recent, and were chosen as examples of diverse and rigorous art practices. The artists, themselves, while they crossover into art practice at large, are pioneers in digital and new media art in their own countries and for this reason they were invited to participate in the exhibition.

A Modular Framework is the first of its kind in the Central American Region, and as such its purpose is to better acquaint the local culture with new media and digital art practice. At the same time, the exhibit is designed as a marking point, as a fragmentary modular assessment of the rich production of new media art by a specific set of artists who share similarities in their approach to the medium of digital art as a proper practice. The works included comment in one way or another on interconnectivity and possibilities of communication by exploring diverse interests in politics and aesthetics. This diverse activity is the result of a long process of art production that is intertwined with global culture. For this reason, before examining each of the selections, it is necessary to briefly outline the relation of new media and digital art practice in contemporary art history.

The Context of New Media and Digital Art

The type of work produced in new media and digital art is often linked by art and media historians to an interdisciplinary practice defined by the interest to move outside of the

gallery as previously explored during the seventies with site-specific art, and especially conceptual and performance art. Of these three, conceptualism has been more often presented as a predecessor of new media and digital art practice.¹ During the nineties, the Internet was viewed by emerging artists, who had online access, as a space in which to present work outside of not only the gallery but also their immediate locality.² Such developments have influenced how new media works are currently presented as objects of art in a physical space. The works included in *A Modular Framework* reflect on this process, from different starting points.

Some of the participants in the exhibition, such as Brian Mackern and Gustavo Romano, began to work within the paradigm of new media throughout the nineties along with other artists active in the United States and Europe. Yet, these artists, or many of their contemporaries, living or linked to Latin America have not been included in the history of digital or Internet art written by historians working for well-established centers and institutions particularly in Europe and in the United States. As a long term practitioner myself, I have critically reflected on this and have come to the conclusion that curators and new media and digital artists, themselves, were the ones that helped shape the current history of new media and digital art within the communities that initially supported them. While some books have been written on new media and digital art history, these have been contributed, in my view, with the understanding that the history will change with future contributions. *New Media and Digital Art History*, as a proper practice, is rather new, and historians are likely to constantly revise accounts of new media and digital art (or so is my hope). I believe, then, that the time is ripe to acknowledge at least some of the artists from Latin America, or artists who have ties to Latin America, and who have been active in new media and digital art since at least the time when the Internet was launched. It is obviously not possible to include all the artists whose work I have researched in this exhibition, and I hope that other curators and artists become proactive in creating more exhibitions that shed light on the rich production of Latin America and its diaspora.

The contextualization of Latin American new media and digital art history is linked to well established (and still relevant) contentions of center/periphery, the construction of the Other, and narratives of difference that were first widely discussed during postmodernism. To add to this complexity, new media and digital art, even though it has been included in various biennales and major international exhibitions, is still in the process of assimilation by the art institution, and therefore artists who are often linked to new media and digital production have a different position from others who may be active in well-established art disciplines. This is not the case for every artist in *A Modular Framework*, of course, because some of them crossover. Paul Ramirez-Jonas, for instance, is actually better known for his diverse studio practice, and Fernando

¹ For ways in which conceptualism is linked to new media and digital art practice, see Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 11-25; Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 19-30; Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, *New Media Art* (Hong Kong, London, et. al.: Taschen, 2009), 8-9.

² This statement is made based on my own relationship with artists from this period. See the exhibition P2P[iece], which I curated in 2004, <http://navasse.net/p2pF/>, accessed February 17, 2011.

Orellana, who might appear to be a devoted computer programmer, also crosses over with his paintings on canvas. Both of these artists, as well as others, are included in the exhibition not only because their work points to relevant exploration in new media and digital art practice, but because they demonstrate an ability to interpolate within the field, thus pushing the establishment to renegotiate its historical ground.

For all these precedents, in the next section I present a brief survey on some of the issues that informed the art production of Latin America since conceptualism was proposed as a global activity that is linked to new media and digital art, to then move on to descriptions of each of the selected works.³

Historical Precedents

Kevin Power, in his extensive introduction to the anthology *Pensamiento crítico en el nuevo arte latinoamericano*, outlines the critical positions at play throughout Latin America on discourses such as difference, center/periphery, and the construct of the Other.⁴ He explains that some contemporary critics acknowledge that such discourses are still spaces for resistance against Western hegemony, while others argue that they have been assimilated by the international global market. Art critic and curator, Ticio Escobar, who contributed an essay to Power's anthology, endorses this last point. He explains that neoliberal influence throughout Latin America often produced fetishized objects for comfortable consumption by the international market.⁵ In other words, difference becomes yet another form for selling Latin American art as a commodity. The result is that there is no real resistance, as conceptual artists in different parts of the world had practiced during the seventies. Instead, Ticio argues, many artists tend to water down their works to make them digestible by the international art market.⁶

The critical position on the assimilation of the aforementioned discourses by the global market (capital proper) as analyzed by Escobar is similar to Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's position on post-colonialism. Hardt and Negri in their book *Empire* argue that the resistance based on difference, and on the concept of center and periphery that defined post-colonialists during postmodernism became fully assimilated by the global market. They write about postcolonials: "Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference. These theorists thus find themselves pushing against an open door."⁷

Along these lines, Power comments on how some critics included in his anthology view difference in terms of feminism, identity, and the construction of the Other, as bland

³ I have been in contact with artists throughout Latin America since the late-nineties, and have followed their career through e-mail lists such as *nettime-lat* (no longer functioning), as well as *nettime-lat*, *Iberoamerica-act*, and *Artenuovinteractiva*. I have also traveled to various Latin American Countries to get a better sense for art production.

⁴ Kevin Power, ed., "Introducción: La crítica latinoamericana dentro del contexto global," *Pensamiento crítico en el Nuevo arte latinoamericano* (Madrid: Fundación Cesar Manrique, 2006), 16-19.

⁵ *Ibid*, 189.

⁶ Power, 13, and Ticio Escobar, "El arte latinoamericano: el debe y el haber de lo global," *ibid*, 189.

⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Passages of sovereignty," *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard Press, 2000), 138

versions of resistance, while others do not. Nevertheless, Power argues that the writings by critics who have contributed to such discourses in Latin America must be evaluated according to the particular contexts for which they were written in response.⁸ This multilayered context preceded and currently informs new media and digital art.

What happened in the nineties in new media and digital art production globally has precedents in the seventies, if we accept as a convention what Stephen Bann argues in the introductory catalogue essay for the exhibition *Global Conceptualism*. Bann contextualizes the exhibition which took place at the Queen's Museum in 1999 as evidence that the concepts of center and periphery were questioned by the internationalization of conceptualism as a critical principle used by different artists throughout the world to serve their own local interests: “[*Global Conceptualism*] explicitly rejects the customary practice of plotting out the topology of artistic connections in terms of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’.”⁹ He also adds: “Global Conceptualism offers an alternative framework of multiple points of origin.”¹⁰

Maria Carmen Ramirez in her essay contribution also for the exhibition *Global Conceptualism*, complements Bann's argument. She specifically examines what happened during the seventies in Latin America, when conceptualism was explored not as a movement but as a critical paradigm. During this time, she argues, the activities that took place in Latin America that could be considered as part of conceptual art not only were at play side by side, but also, in some ways, were ahead of other places normally credited with defining conceptual art language: “The emergence of conceptualism in Latin America not only closely paralleled but, in many key instances, even anticipated important developments of center-based conceptual art.”¹¹ The reasons for this, Ramirez argues, is that Latin American artists assimilated and converted patterns at play in other areas of the world to engage with their own reality, and were in direct exchange rather than imitation with other areas around the world.

All this is to state that conceptualism marks the moment when information became truly global.¹² At the time when conceptualism was taking shape internationally, there was no Internet. Instead, Bann, as well as Ramirez explain that conceptualism was defined in decentralized fashion by the idea of working in terms of physical travel: “much art of this period came out of a suitcase, or could be made on the spot by people in transit.”¹³ Critic and curator Lucy Lippard also refers to the suitcase as a form of working with conceptual art, while citing an exhibition in which she was involved in Argentina in 1968:

I returned belatedly radicalized by contact with artists there, especially the Rosario Group, whose mixture of conceptual and political ideas was a revelation.

⁸ Power, 23.

⁹ Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, ed. Luis Camintzer, et. al. (New York: Queens Museum, 1999), 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Maria Carmen Ramirez, “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980,” *ibid.*, 54.

¹² Bann, 4.

¹³ Ibid.

In Latin America I was trying to organize a ‘suitcase exhibition’ of dematerialized art that would be taken from country to country by ‘idea artists’ using free airline tickets.¹⁴

In this sense, as has been credited by various new media art historians, conceptual art explored the principles of sharing as well as mobility which were primary elements that made the Internet popular.¹⁵

How new media and digital art may be contextualized in terms of Latin America after the acknowledgment of conceptualism as an international, yet fragmented set of strategies and attitudes and art production is rather different from how the object of the Latin American work of art may be viewed from the yet again reconfigured center/periphery debate, as revisited in 2010 by Lima based artist and critic Miguel A. López. He argues that while the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition may have questioned and repositioned the international production of art that can be considered within the umbrella of conceptualism, it also opened up a new way to reinforce long standing lineages and typologies in Latin America. More specifically, López admits that the process of recognition of the importance of Latin American conceptualism as part of a global art practice is successful, but that now that the artists who are considered part of this process have become the usual points of reference. They are now part of the contemporary canon; such paradigm, he states, must be questioned yet again.

In contrast to this view of revisiting and questioning art production in Latin America, yet, again, from a pre-established paradigm that has been well assimilated by the art institution, I believe that there is an alternative critical approach to the production of Latin America after its recontextualization within a global, and strategically constructed, conceptual discourse—as promoted by Bann and Ramirez, and more recently, in his own way, Lopez.

The selections of *A Modular Framework* offer an alternative approach to art production in Latin America not as a paradigm to be questioned, yet again, along the familiar language of modernism and postmodernism, but as an intellectual space in which contributors can reflect on the potential of a decentralized network infrastructure—that, if used effectively, can lead to reconfigurations of long standing narratives that have shaped how Latin America is positioned in global production. For this reason, the examination of the selected art works in the exhibition will shed light on how new media has shifted the functionality of art in a world that favors “a modular framework” for cultural exchange—hence the name of the exhibition.

Selection of Works

As it becomes evident based on what has been briefly surveyed above, the works presented in the exhibition come after a time when the concepts of hybridity and center/periphery have been—if not absorbed—certainly negotiated to a comfortable

¹⁴ Lucy Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” *Reconsidering the Object of Art* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1996), 20.

¹⁵ Green, Paul, Tribe & Jana.

degree by the global market. The artists in *A Modular Framework* can be considered productive nodes in a decentralized system, because their works do not share specific narratives and are not expected to be recognized with a unifying meta-narrative. Instead they were chosen with the purpose to present a fragment of the diverse approaches to art production in new media and digital art, after a time in which Latin American art has been evaluated extensively by previous generations with their primary goal that it be recognized by the artworld proper. Nevertheless, the artists do share certain elements which become evident upon a comparative analysis, to which we now turn.

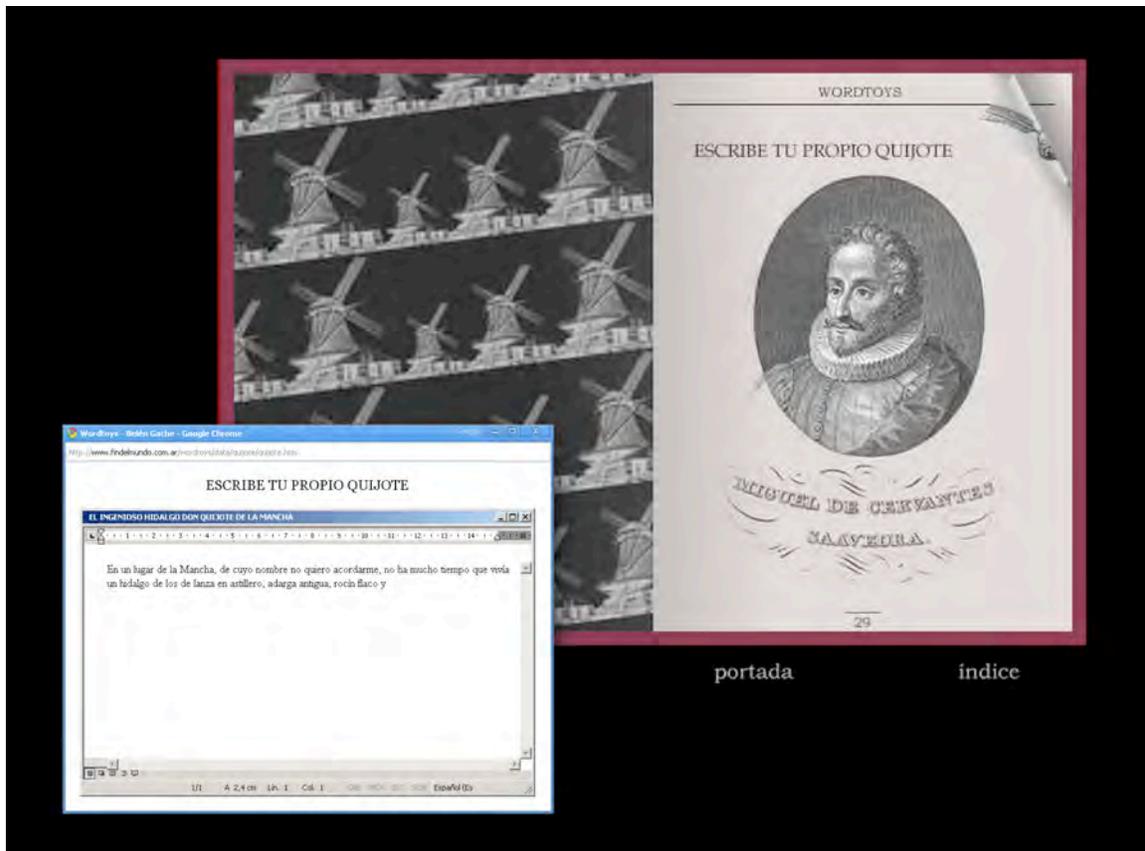


Figure 1: *Belen Gache, Argentina, Wordtoys (2006), Website*

Wordtoys (2006) is a website by Belen Gache (Argentina) in which the user can explore the potential of literary expression with the use of Internet technology. *Wordtoys* comments on the works of Carol, Cervantes, and Borges among many others. It also focuses on long-time literary subjects of interests in both the east and the west, such as butterflies and birds in order to comment on cultural idiosyncrasies. Gache's work extends the experimentation of early hypertext literature to combine it with sound and animated images in pieces such as, "Mujeres vampiro invaden la Colonia del Sacramento," three stories that can be read simultaneously. The hypertext is also accompanied by a metronomic sound for each story, which overlap as the user clicks. The stories can be read as metaphors for independence with a strong influence of existentialist philosophy. Gache also moves past early hypertext conventions to experiment with sound in "Phone Readings." In this case, the literary aspect is enacted

by a female voice that answers any of several phones clicked by the user. The stories are self-referential, all in some way pointing to literature's intertextuality. All stories are about searching and finding something. One story is about an umbrella that is lost, then found, and then lost again; all when one needs it the most—during the rain. Another is about a glove that is also found and lost, and another about people who search for things that they never find, but do find things they never looked for; at times, they find themselves.

Wordtoys, consequently, contains many of the strategies currently at play in electronic literature, especially if we are to take the concept that literature in the time of the digital only needs to demonstrate a strong literary aspect.¹⁶ Gache contributes to this open-ended definition and moves past it to also demonstrate how the literary has always shared a strong relationship with the visual arts. One of the strengths of the work is that it gives proper recognition to the literary tradition in global terms—with the careful citation of literature from different parts of the world—while also exploring what literature could become once it is ubiquitous in networked culture.



Figure 2: Gustavo Romano, Argentina, *IP Poetry* (2006), Audio Visual Installation

¹⁶ Katherine Hayles, "Electronic Literature: What is it?" *Eliterature.org*, <http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>, accessed on November 23, 2010.

IP Poetry (2006) by Gustavo Romano (Argentina) is an audiovisual installation that also functions online. It explores the possibilities of literature with the use of computer automation. Romano wrote a computer program that creates poems created according to online searches. Pre-defined poetic phrases are finished according to Google queries. The gallery visitor, upon entering the dark space, views a large projection of four close-ups of the lower half of a person's face, which simulate the pronunciation of the pre-written phrases and the search results.

Romano, like Gache exposes the structure behind the creative process, which is that of filtering, and selecting from a large vocabulary, which in his case is the ever increasing archives of the Internet. When one considers the creative process of writing with this context in mind, it becomes evident that Romano's piece comments on how actual sentences are created. A person begins with the subject and searches for a predicate that will satisfy the meaning she is trying to convey. The writing of this text, which you are currently reading, was possible by a similar process. The result is a long process of constant revision—of going back to a databank of vocabulary and sentence structure (defined by denotation and connotation), much how the searches keep revisiting the same initial phrases to reconfigure them with a different ending. Admittedly, this may be viewed by a humanist as a crude comparison between a human and a machine, but this is exactly the strength of *IP Poetry*—the fact that it comments on poetry—one of the most revered humanist forms of expression. Romano's piece shows how it is an act of selectivity that takes place in the search for the perfect rhyme.

IP Poetry has been presented as an installation consisting of computers with no covers, suggesting a sense of vulnerability when one relates to them as bodies. A certain coldness sips in as one is confronted with four identical lower halves of a person's face. In this sense, the virtual robot (as Romano refers to his computer application) becomes embodied in the very machine that makes it run. No matter the set up of *IP Poetry*, the voices make the words sound detached—void of feeling, while offering philosophical statements about the human condition.

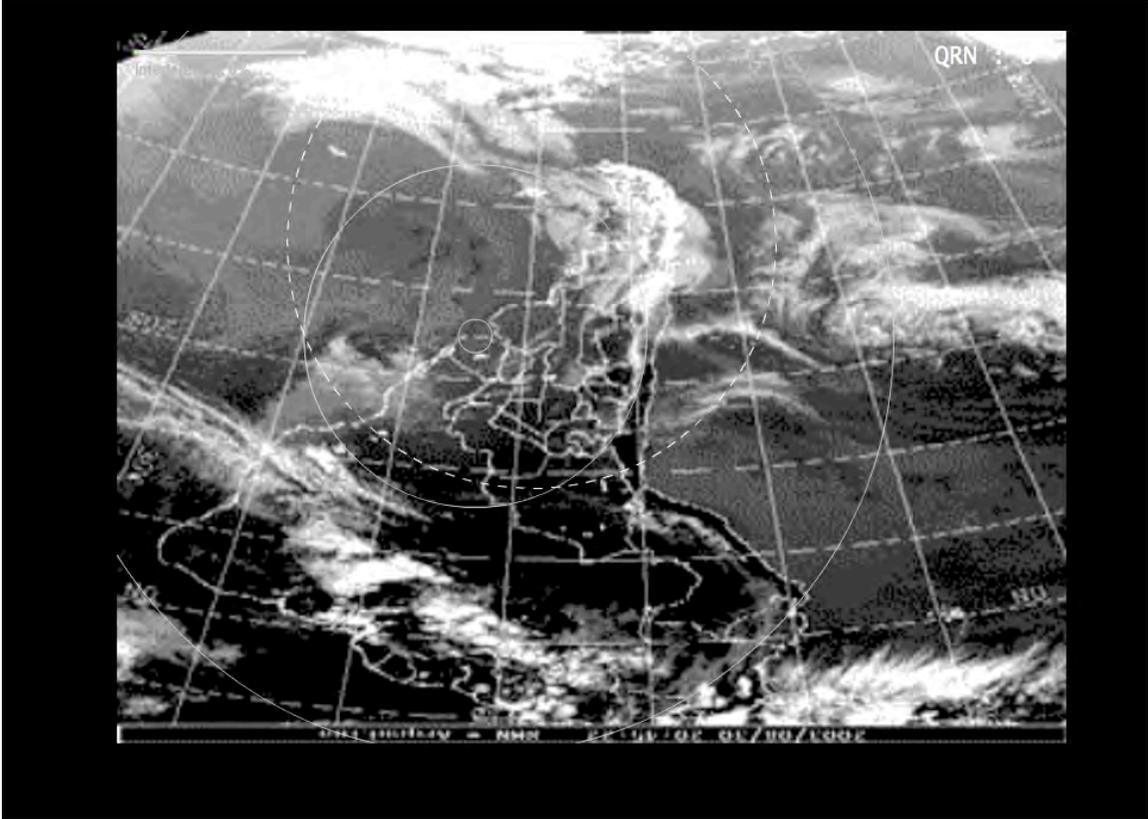


Figure 3: Brian Mackern, Uruguay, *El Temporal de Santa Rosa* (2002), *The Storm of Santa Rosa*, (Audio-visual installation)

The Storm of Santa Rosa (2002) by Brian Mackern (Uruguay) is an Audio-visual installation that started as a sound recording that can also be performed. It consists of sound recorded of the Storm of Santa Rosa, which took place between the 20th of August and the 8th of September of 2002, in Montevideo, Uruguay. The storm is linked to the story of a nun who prayed one night when an invasion was to take place in Lima, Perú around August of 1612. A major storm ensued and the enemy was unable to attack, which was credited to her devotional prayers. With time people noticed that a storm would develop around August of each year. This eventually led to naming the yearly event “Storm of Santa Rosa.”

Marckern’s interest in recording the storm is not only aesthetic but also political. In this work he links the history of Uruguay with its current position in the world. A hint of this is in the way the work is installed. When entering the dark room, one encounters a projection of the map of the Americas upside down. This is a clear reference to the work of Joaquín Torrez García, who originally turned the map of the Americas upside down to question the conventional worldview of the south, as being at the bottom, and the north at the top.¹⁷ His inversion is considered a declaration of autonomy from Western culture—a way of demonstrating how the southern cone has its own voice. From the area

¹⁷ It is needless to say that the concept of bottom and top imply hierarchical positions of power. The most common statement that demonstrates this connotation is “It went south,” implying it did not go as planned or as well as possible.

recognized as Montevideo, an animated graphic that simulates a transmission that corresponds with the sound, which is activated with a camera sensor that notes the movement taking place in the room. The more movement, the louder the sound, and the more aggressive the graphic shifts on the screen.

Gabriel Galli Danese in an essay written for Mackern's installation, contextualizes the need for people to come to terms with nature, in this case by naming the storm that takes place regularly in South America as part of a religious narrative. This gesture of naming is an assimilative strategy that enables South American culture to cope with the fact that nature is uncontrollable.¹⁸ Mackern also links the drive for control to the nationalistic politics of the south, specifically Uruguay's, when he contextualizes *the Storm of Santa Rosa* as a natural event that metaphorically becomes a reflective installation of the economic collapse that took place in the southern cone during July, just around the time that the storm of Santa Rosa arrived that year.¹⁹ This metaphor then combines effectively aesthetics with politics, enabling the viewer to come to terms with her art experience as part of a negotiation of cultural and natural tensions, which people desire to control.

Mackern shares an interest in disruption with Romano. Both artists' installation depend on the potential for noise to filter into their work. For Romano this takes place when the viewer is waiting for the search result, not knowing if the poetic phrases will make sense at all, but simply be noise. For Mackern this takes place when the viewer realizes that she can alter the work with violent movements.

¹⁸ Gabriel Galli Danese, "Brian Mackern y el arte atmosférico," <http://34s56w.org/xtcs/instalacion.html>, accessed on February 15, 2011.

¹⁹ Panic over, depression not: A long struggle with recession, inflation and debt lies ahead, *The Economist*, Sep 5th 2002, <http://www.economist.com/node/1318358>, accessed January 13, 2011. Also see: "Banking crisis grips Uruguay," BBC News, July 31, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2162956.stm>, accessed January 13, 2002.



Figure 4: Arcangel Constantini, Mexico, *Atari Noise: Como en su casa* (2000 al presente) *Atari Noise: At home*, (Installation)

Atari Noise: at Home (2000 to the present) is an installation by Arcangel Constantini (Mexico). This work has taken different forms. At times it has been presented with multiple screens, and at others in a single monitor on a pedestal. For the exhibition at the Cultural Center of Spain in El Salvador Constantini chose to present a typical middle class living room from the 1980's, in which teenagers would play Atari video games. At the center of the living room is a hacked Atari console, with a series of buttons as well as an altered cartridge of Pac Man. The installation is designed to be interactive. People can sit down and play the console, which offers abstract patterns that can be played similarly to video games. For the opening events of the exhibition Constantini performed with the console. He sat down and played Pac Man and then switched to play abstract audio-visual patterns.



Figure 5: Arcangel Constantini, Mexico, *Atari Noise: Como en su casa* (2000 al presente) *Atari Noise: At home*, (Installation, detail)

Constantini's work precedes the now popular interest in video game art as part of the long tradition of hacking hardware known as circuit bending. *Atari Noise* links the tradition of abstract art to gaming in a way that questions how one should engage with the work of art. The gallery visitor is expected to play with the work of art in a way that simulates destruction—since the hacked cartridge produces pure noise. In this way, *Atari Noise* is a direct commentary on how the work of art has been contextualized as a precious object. More importantly, it comments on the now expected role of the viewer to complete the work, quite common not only in art practice, but culture at large. Like Mackern's work, Constantini's also has an online component, and it also presents noise as a strategy of disruption, with the purpose to provide a moment of contemplation that cannot be reflected upon, only acted. For Mackern, this consists of a person or group of people moving constantly inside the projection space, and for Constantini it is the playing of abstract patterns as aggressively as possible on the console as one would play a video game.



Figure 6: Antonio Mendoza, Cuba/USA, *Idiotrobot.com* (2010), Two Channel Installation

Idiotrobot.com (2010) by Antonio Mendoza (Cuba/USA) is an online work that is also presented as a two-channel installation. It juxtaposes two quicktime movie clips at random, which are remixes of pop-cultural imagery. The viewer is likely to recognize some if not most of the clips, as they are taken from Hollywood films and popular TV commercials as well as other images that have proven to be pervasive in media.

Mendoza appropriates imagery that can only function in an over-saturated culture; consequently, he exposes the violence in media. Mendoza's work is an example of how music and image can be sampled, appropriated, and remixed in a way similar to how Romano and Gache exercise selectivity in their works: by showing that the act of expression is also an act of selection from a large bank of material. For Gache's "Escribite tu propio Quixote" (also part of *Wordtoys*) we can note Borges's relationship to the library as a source of inspiration as an archive of material to draw from, similarly to Romano's Google searches in *IP Poetry*. Likewise, the video sources collected and remixed by Mendoza expose the creative act's relation to a library, which in his case is a database from which to remix image and sound.

Similarly to *IP Poetry*, *Idiotrobot.com* uses automation to also question how we come to terms with what may be considered original, and begins to show that things become interesting when selectivity is performed by an artist or individual with a rigorous

understanding of how we negotiate representation in a time when repetition is a relentless strategy of communication. Repetition has become mass media's guarantee that people will not forget a message. *Idiotrobot.com* takes repetition for what it is: a violent act on the senses.



Figure 7: Fernando Orellana, El Salvador/USA, *Plain Text* (2008), Installation with plasma screens

Plain Text (2008) by Fernando Orellana, (El Salvador/USA) is a software installation of two screens, each presenting a sentence with the last word spelled automatically from the last letter to the first. The piece is inspired by the Infinite Monkey theorem, which proposes that if one has an infinite number of monkeys and typewriters, one can assign the monkeys to write any text; the monkeys would also write other texts in this process. Orellana took this theorem and created a program that runs through the alphabet for each letter. The first sentence states: “You want _____” and the second “Will you _____?” Orellana wrote the first sentence in the imperative, in order to reference the terms in which consumption engages individuals: by imposing what they are to consume. The second sentence is philosophical. Orellana's interest in this case is that people reflect on open-ended questions of life.



Figure 8: Fernando Orellana, El Salvador/USA, *Plain Text* (2008), Installation with plasma screens

The strength of Orellana's installation is that it demands an action from the viewer. The first sentence imposes a demand to consume, while the second poses speculation. The latter lends itself to greater abstraction because the reader must fill in the verb. The two sentences form a binary that is reflective of contemporary culture, which has reached an unprecedented threshold in media saturation, driven by corporations that strive to attain revenue with computing, the very same technology that Orellana uses to make his commentary.

Orellana, similarly to Gache and Romano, references the selective process that takes place in making meaning. Like Gache's references to literature as a database of inspiration, and Romano's Google searches, Orellana asks the viewer to finish each sentence based on their own database of knowledge. As the letters change on each space, the viewer can speculate on the possible words that can be created. In this case, it is the viewer that must rely on her knowledge to complete the possible meaning of the work, while in Romano's and Gache's the viewer merely has to acknowledge this process, which is begun and completed by the automated work.



Figure 9: Paul Ramirez-Jonas, Honduras/USA, *Another Day* (2003), Three monitors installation

Another Day (2003) by Paul Ramirez-Jonas (Honduras/USA) is three channel video installation consisting of three monitors that show the sunrise taking place in 90 cities around the world. It was designed to make reference to airports and train stations. *Another Day* was installed in the Cultural Center of Spain's lobby. People who sat in the lobby could look up to the monitors placed at about eight feet above the floor. The cities are listed according to the time left for the sun to rise. A countdown is constantly running to the right of each city's name.

In *Another Day* it is the sun that travels not the individual. Consequently, the work comments on the ongoing development of a globalized interconnected world that often may give a sense of depersonalization. There is also a measured sense of exoticism as people are likely to view the installation during the daytime, and the cities listed will

always be on the other side of the world. Travel, then, is here presented as a potentially exotic activity enacted by naming the city to which one would like to travel. One can also read this as a deliberate emphasis on networked culture (especially if we make a historical note of travel as discussed by Lippard), by way of highlighting selected nodes (cities). Ramirez-Jonas's piece, then, is relevant because it makes a connection to our growing need to be constantly connected through some type of network.

Like Orellana's work, which demands of the viewer to relate to a command and a question, Ramirez-Jonas's work asks that the viewer speculate about her position in the world. In *Another Day* the viewer is able to place herself in global terms as she evaluates her familiarity with names of cities that may not be familiar at all.



Figure 10: Giselle Beiguelman, Brazil, *Sometimes* (2007), Interactive projection/Generative Video

Sometimes (2007, part of ZKM collection) by Giselle Beiguelman (Brazil) is an installation that comments on the connection between mobile technology and the urban landscape. *Sometimes* encourages the gallery visitor to manipulate imagery taken originally with a cell phone by the artist.

When entering the installation, the visitor encounters three screen projections each with its own mouse. The viewer is supposed to move the mouse across the screen in order to

create a composition of looped images, sequentially flipping within a window. The result is a beautiful composition that becomes a metaphor for travel.

As the user moves the mouse around the screen, a trace builds up much like a glaze in painting. The more the user moves the mouse, the more saturated the trace marks become. In this sense the work references the principles of under-painting. In *Sometimes*, however, there is no difference between an underpainting and the final product. The installation is always in a process of creation, and it will never be finished. Furthermore, at the beginning of each day, the respective screens are blank, and the visitors will begin a new work, which will be lost at the end of the day. *Sometimes*, then, while referencing painting, does so byway of reminding the viewer of the ephemerality of digital media.

In *Sometimes* we find the concept of travel once again. Similar to Ramirez-Jonas, Beiguelman comments on traveling; only in her case, there is no actual destination. The images are of buildings that the traveler passes as the car moves through the streets of a large city. This may very well be the new version of the localized flaneur who no longer needs to go out into the world, but can experience it through some technological mediation: images taken safely from a moving car become the means of simulated travel for the gallery visitor who comfortably moves them around the screen projection to create a beautiful abstract composition that will be lost once the computer is put to rest at the end of the day.

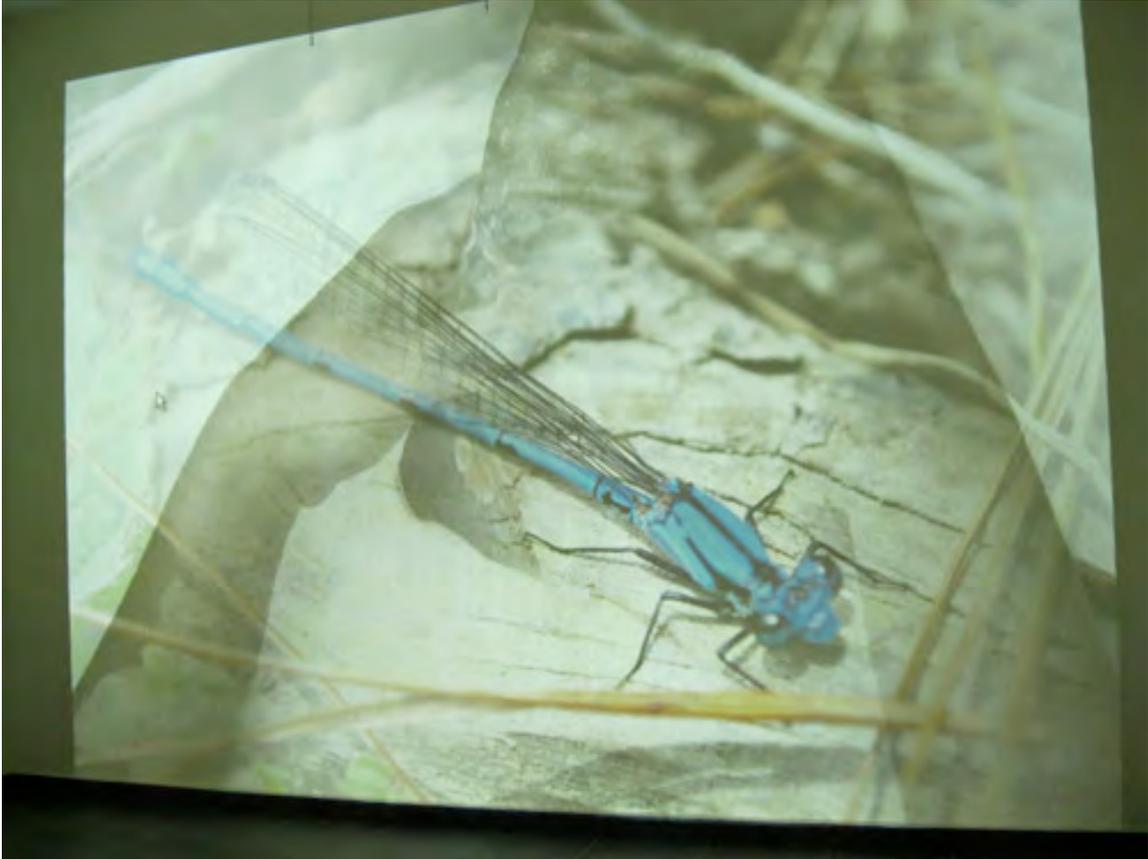


Figure 11: Isabel Restrepo, Colombia, *Atandocabos* (2010) Single channel interactive video installation

Atandocabos (2010) by Isabel Restrepo (Colombia) is a video projection that integrates personal histories of women to objects of sentimental value. Restrepo's installation invites the visitor to move around to discover a hidden image behind the video footage that shows women wrapping an indescribable object, while they tell their story about the object.

Atandocabos, as poetic as it may appear, is a critical commentary on the contemporary reality of Colombia. The women who tell their stories are part of a matriarchal society that continually experiences violence. As the viewer interacts with the projection, she learns about the history of Colombia through the personal anecdotes told by the women. The images that appear behind the video were chosen by Restrepo to extend the women's respective personal stories to other issues that may not be obvious. In this way, the installation becomes a space in which to reflect on the construction of history through fragments of personal anecdotes that may help one better understand the complexity of memory.

Like Beiguelman Restrepo's work takes images and manipulates them to create an aesthetically pleasing composition. Here again, we can note a painterly gesture, in terms of a glaze. In *Atandocabos* the user becomes the mouse (when comparing it to Beiguelman). It is the user that must unveil with her body the image that is behind. But

with time, the video takes over again, and the image fades to the background. The visitor must then be willing to keep moving so that the image in the back can be uncovered. This can be read as a metaphor of what is necessary of people to be critical, which is to be active not just intellectually, but physically. The visitor can only gain a better understanding of the story if she is willing to become involved with both body and mind.

DEPORTISTA



● **ISAIR JAIME PEÑA GARCÍA**
EDAD: 23 años
JUGADOR: Desde hace años pertenecía al Marte de Soyapango, de la Tercera División del fútbol nacional.

“Quien mató a mi hijo se manchó las manos con sangre inocente, porque él era un joven que solo se dedicaba a jugar, ir a la iglesia y estar con su novia”

Padre del futbolista

Figure 12: Mayra Barraza, El Salvador, *100 dias en republica de la muerte* (2006), *100 Days in the Republic of Murder*, (blog)

100 Days in the Republic of Murder (2006) is a blog by Mayra Barraza (El Salvador). It reported on violent murders that took place in El Salvador for 100 days, between September and December of 2006. The blog functions as a space to reflect on Salvadoran violence.

The online project is used to tell stories and create commentary on El Salvador's harsh reality of gang violence. Here we could consider the blog as part of a new form of literary practice that is taking shape online. It can be considered the next stage of writing along the lines of the hypertext, and literary explorations like Gache's, previously described.

Barraza goes against the initial tendency of some early Internet artists which was to create work that deemphasized the location of its production, and celebrated the potential of participating in a network with no apparent boundaries. Barraza overturns this option

in online communication in order to create a work that comments on her local situation. In this way, *100 Days in the Republic of Murder* becomes a form of education, while also exploring the creative potential of online communication in its current stage often referred to as Web 2.0.

Barraza uses the blog to foment discussion about issues that are real to average people in El Salvador. This work may be the most accessible to anyone who visits the exhibition, as local people will be able to understand the subject matter with great intimacy while also considering the possibilities for communication and dissemination with online technology.



Figure 13: Bang Lab Collective and Electronic Disturbance Theater, USA, *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2010), Performance/installation

Transborder Immigrant Tool (2010) by Bang Lab Collective and Electronic Disturbance Theater, (USA) is a mobile phone tool designed to provide GPS information on the location of water, and nearby shelters and immigration centers for people crossing the U.S./ Mexico border. The phones also recite poetry, to which travelers can listen while on the road.

For the exhibition, *The Transborder Immigrant Tool* was presented as an art installation on five cell phones. The gallery visitor would enter and encounter the phones reciting poetry as well as displaying GPS information. The collective's aim with this work is to open a space for dialogue on the complexity of geographical borders in a time of global immigration. The piece is designed to create discourse that moves beyond the gallery into the real world.



Bang Lab Collective and Electronic Disturbance Theater, USA
Transborder Immigrant Tool (2010), Installation detail

This project shares an interest with Barraza's in that it brings into the gallery space an issue that is well-understood by the average person, in its case, it is the issue of immigration, which is also linked to the gang violence taking place in El Salvador. The issue of immigration is something that needs no specialized language in order to be understood in El Salvador; thus the installation becomes a bridge between the specialized and privileged art space, usually attended by the culturally enriched in society, and the real world, in which at times art appears too intellectual, too specialized—and inevitably—incidental to real life issues. In this sense, *Transborder Immigrant Tool* demonstrates how art can be a political tool that functions on various cultural layers simultaneously.

After the New and the Digital

As it may be evident at this point, I have been referring to the selected works in *A Modular Framework* as new media and digital art. The reason is that these terms are the ones most commonly used when contextualizing the works of artists who emphasize the role of the computer in the production of their works. In my view, the terms complement each other in order to emphasize the process of working with computing in similar fashion to how conceptualism privileged ideas. This is why I choose to mention them together.

The difference with new media and digital art from conceptualism, however, is that while concepts need to be carefully considered for eventual production, such process is always linked materially to the computer. Another aspect to be kept in mind about new media and digital art is that the artist is always working by default with information; and if an actual object is produced, this may well be a deliberate strategy by the artist to enter the more established artworld, in which the art object is likely to be sold.²⁰

The issue with digitally based work is that its uniqueness is taken beyond the initial principles of originality that the analog photograph introduced in the nineteenth century. While the photograph could be validated by claiming that a negative would be destroyed to make each print in a series more valuable, with the digital work of art such argument is mute. The original shares the same quality with the copy—that is, of course, if the copy has not been compressed for efficient exchange or manipulation of the material. In digital work there is no original. This means that the artist and the gallery system must rely directly on discourse to develop monetary value on a work that cannot be sold based on its uniqueness. These issues have kept the digitally based work of art, in large part, outside of the established commercial art market. For all these reasons, new media artists often work on commission and with careful agreements, much how Sol Le Witt

²⁰ Blake Stimson argues that Conceptual art, at least in NY, contributed to keeping the gallery system afloat in its own way. He shows an awareness of this implication beyond the United States, to which I add that the assimilation of conceptualism's critical strategy by the commercial sector is still relevant in Latin America because the international art market is largely influenced by the models that were developed in New York, Post-World War II. See Blake Stimson, "The Promise of Conceptual Art," *Conceptual Art, A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1999), xlii.

developed his art practice.²¹ New media artists often charge for the right to show their work (if they choose to take this route), but others are willing to simply share it.

The way the new media and digital art work functions in Latin America, as a dematerialized form of production complicates the contextualization of art after conceptualism was proposed as an alternative cultural interpretation of art practices in different parts of the world from the seventies to the present. In other words, new media and digital art throughout Latin America differs from how conceptualism was framed by Bann And Ramirez, and the other critics I mentioned in previous sections of this text. A principal reason is that the computer enabled artists in different countries to make art and share it with anyone who had online access, (or at least make available extensive information about it).²² This led to production that cannot be easily contextualized within any specific discourse, including that of Latin America in terms of modernism, because the works are designed to be shared modularly. A sample of this shift is evident in the projects part of *A Modular Framework*. They are interpolative devices that can be seen from various points of view and contextualized within diverse cultural themes, which can include technological exploration, identity construction, geographical issues and abstract experimentation, among many others.

Difference politics recur in the arguments by the theorists I have surveyed above; who successfully give attention to a historically important body of work that otherwise would not have been noticed had it not been discussed within the discourse of Latin America. The result is that the work is committed to be legitimated by a process of subordination, as the critics, with their best intentions achieve to point out how the work has been omitted or subjected to interpellation under a hegemonic post-colonial paradigm. This is fair and just. But the question is, can the work be highlighted with the same intensity under other contexts without worrying about losing what has been achieved by Latin American critics? This question, in my view, remains unanswered.²³ The result is the work's validation repeatedly relies on an accepted and comfortable argument of difference. What these writers have done is similar to what Judith Butler argues Catharine MacKinnon did for feminism. Butler explains that MacKinnon accepts a heterosexual model to discuss sexuality, which, even though it is not the author's intent, ends up functioning within a space that is already defined for the entering subject: "Whereas MacKinnon offers a powerful critique of sexual harassment, she institutes a regulation of another kind: to have a gender means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination."²⁴

²¹ I previously contextualized the work of Sol Le Witt with new media. See my blog post, "A Visit to Magasin 3: Notes on Sweden's Approach to Art and Exhibitions, by Eduardo Navas," <http://remixtheory.net/?p=403>, accessed on February 18, 2011.

²² I state this as a practitioner of new media art. I met the artists included in this exhibit as well as many others because of their devotion to sharing their work via online communities.

²³ I state this based on my discussions of cultural producers throughout Latin America, as well as a combination of readings I have performed in my investigation. I also say it based on my own experience as a Latin American.

²⁴ Judith Butler, "Preface," *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), xv.

I will repurpose (remix) selectively part of Butler's sentence, to expose the hegemonic ideology that informs not only gender and sexuality (her subject of research), but also, in our case, the identity of an entire region. This is my remix: *whereas the writers discussed above offer a powerful critique of a hegemonic reading in Latin American art production, they institute a regulation of another kind: to be considered Latin American means to have entered already into a political relationship of subordination.* Lopez's need to go back and revisit issues that are well-understood yet once again is evidence of this tendency. These critics, then, inevitably, even though it is not their aim, provide a reductive reading in the name of *difference*; a paradigm that at this point is too comfortable and is a thriving space with no real resistance in the international art market when it is called upon as a legitimation card.

The question that lurks for Latin American art in terms of identity, similarly to the gender for Butler, is how can one discuss shared issues, or participate in activities that are not always linked to the initial source that provides legitimation in the cultural spectrum? This is difficult to understand, let alone answer because, as I demonstrate with my remix of Butler's sentence, the ideological template that is imposed by the established order on any subject is preset before the subject even enters discourse. Butler argues that this problem becomes evident when we revisit the foundationalist reasoning of identity politics, which advocates agency in association with a pre-existing "I" which again keeps us within a tautology. In response to this issue, she writes:

This move to qualify and enmire the preexisting subject has appeared necessary to establish a point of agency that is not fully *determined* by that culture and discourse. And yet, this kind of reasoning falsely presumes (a) agency that is not fully determined by a prediscursive 'I,' even if that 'I' is found in the midst of a discursive convergence, and (b) that to be constituted by discourse is to be *determined* by discourse, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency.²⁵

Butler follows this point by explaining that she sees the subject (the doer) being constructed "in and through the deed." The problem she sees on the question of whether one could see a subject in "woman" in terms of gender and sexuality (which I am transferring to whether one can see a subject in "artist" and "Latin American Art") is that the subject, as I previously noted is viewed as predetermined well before it is able to enter discourse. This format again is self-circular and does not provide the subject with agency to be constructed as discourse develops, which Butler argues would provide the subject real agency.

A way to disrupt from within this self-referential system is possible, Butler argues, when the subject becomes part of a process of repetition aimed to rupture the conventional understanding of how the subject is constructed. In other words, the focus should be not on repeating a discursive paradigm to keep fomenting discussion about identity or gender politics based on a tautological definition of the Other, but on how to repeat with the

²⁵ Ibid, "Conclusion, From Parody to Politics," 195.

strategic aim to disrupt such predisposition.²⁶ She proposes “to displace the very gender norms that enable repetition itself.” While Butler is arguing for gender specifically, I have deliberately extended her critical model (in the spirit of disruption as she, herself, promotes) to art practice because the ideology imposed on the need to define gender is the same ideology that defines art production in terms of difference.

In my view, disruption of the subject’s subordination can be attained when cultural variables are negotiated with the appropriation of technological developments. And this is what drove my selection of the artists included in *A Modular Framework*, as I believe that their works enable the viewer to evaluate the construction of the subject by demonstrating how discourse takes effect when the viewer participates in the work of art’s definition through their actual experience. Each work challenges specific paradigms of convention linked to the subjects of interest of the respective artists. I consider the works in the exhibition exemplary of the effective use of repetition in disruptive fashion with the aim to break out of the tautological arguments. It is now worth briefly revisiting the artworks to evaluate how they contribute to the disruption of the subject’s subordination.

The Subject of Interpellation and Modularity

The artists in the exhibition have repurposed pre-existing material with strategic use of modular technology for critical commentary on subjects, that certainly can appear idiosyncratic, but still form part of a paradigm within the realm of global art production. Their work can be read as strategic disruptions of repetitions, following Butler’s definitions.

To this effect, Romano presents the lower half of his own face as a depersonalized device (a fragment, a module) that recites concrete poetry to anyone around the world with an Internet connection. He demands that the viewer defines the work as it develops in time not before. Mackern takes an annual storm specific to the southern cone and repurposes it as an audio-visual installation that demands exertion from the viewer in order to activate image and sound. The viewer becomes a proactive user who must move to activate the work, and thus becomes part of the subject. Antonio Mendoza pushes the possibilities of modularity by directly showing how images can be taken out of context to create a violent reality made possible through the saturation of images distributed by mass media worldwide. The user is unable to form a concrete narrative, and must question what the subject matter maybe—waiting for a sense of cohesion is futile and the definition of the subject is never complete. Beigelman recontextualizes images taken with a cell phone as an art installation thereby recreating a modular tour of a city that could be anywhere in the world. It is the viewer who must create the composition, thereby again becoming inserted into the actual project as a joint subject. And Restrepo repurposes video of personal anecdotes in relation to appropriated imagery to demonstrate how women define themselves as subjects of a violent history. In turn the viewer joins in the process of definition by moving across the screen.

²⁶ Ibid, 202-03.

Some of the artists, however, create spaces that resemble real situations as a way to invite the viewer to become part of the piece's definition. Constantini's *Atari Noise* simulates the living room of a middle class home. Here a *fictional* middle-class living room that could be found any where in the world, is presented to the viewer, who then is expected to play a hacked Atari game. Similarly, Ramirez-Jonas's *Another Day* creates an ordinary daily situation in which the viewer must reconsider the context of three monitors that present themselves as real communicators of travel. The viewer must negotiate her immediate context (in this case, the lobby of the cultural center) in order to come to terms with the aesthetic space that Ramirez-Jonas creates for them. The viewer, then, questions the piece in the space, and she may even wonder if she is in the right place, thus turning the question on their own position—again here we find a process of definition performed by the viewer as a pivotal factor for the work's understanding taking place.

Gache's *Wordtoys*, on the other hand, recontextualizes text with a different strategy. Her project demonstrates, in Barthesian fashion,²⁷ how it is the reader that actually completes the text—and the reader is integral in providing text with meaning—meaning that the work would be incomplete without the viewer's interaction, which makes it unique each time. Orellana's installation presents text on screens, which, as previously noted, demand that the user defines the work by speculating on the possible words that can be spelled out. In this case the viewer must project herself into the work by trying to figure out what it would say, realizing that the work itself defies to make a specific statement.

Barraza's *100 Days*, encourages the user to navigate links in any order. Similarly to hypertext, it is the user who comes to complete the work. Bang Lab Collective's and Electronic Disturbance Theater's *TBT Tool* implement a software application that is designed to make people aware of specific areas of the world: between the border of the United States and Mexico. The way the tool was presented in the exhibition, with five telephones remind the viewer that in order for the work to be fully experienced one would have to travel to the place where it is meant to function. In this way, the collective points to the power of cultural specificity to expose how immigration and border issues are of concern to everyone, and must be defined only by understanding how the migrant is framed much how the subject of gender is subordinated for Butler.

What all of the artists who participate in *A Modular Framework* point to through their actions whether creating a work that must be experienced in the space or an online work is material that lies beyond the immediate physical space; and here lies the critical act by the artists who ask the viewer to reconsider her preconceived ideas of the work of art. To evaluate further this disruption of repetition as defined by Butler, we can also evaluate Louis Althusser's argument on individuals as subjects of interpellation. For Althusser, a person becomes a subject when she recognizes a code imposed on her whenever such code is activated in a social context. Althusser's example is that of a police officer calling out in the crowd "Hey, you there!"²⁸ The person addressed will then turn around

²⁷ Here I refer to Roland Barthes's theory on Authorship. See, Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

²⁸ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an

without hearing their proper name, knowing that it is him or her who is addressed. The reason for this, Althusser argues is that the subject is aware of the codes imposed by ideology.

For Latin America, historically, the dominant ideology, which Butler refers to as foundationalist reasoning of identity has imposed interpellation in terms of colonialism. Artists have repeatedly rebelled against this recurrence. We only need to look back at the assessment of the various Latin American critics I cite above to evaluate this complexity. They all worry about turning when they are called not by name but by codified abstract terms. However, in my view, what has not been deliberately discussed, or at least acknowledged enough, by historians and critics is the power to contest interpellation through interpolation (through strategic insertion of the subject against the grain that defines it), which is possible when understanding how with the critical use of modularity, along the lines of disruption, as seen by Butler, take effect. This is the contention that I as curator see in all of the works in *A Modular Framework*. The artists use new media and digital technology to open the possibilities of how the works question subjectification because in order for the works to be understood, the user must also become embedded in it. The viewer cannot attain understanding of the work by simply looking at it, even if she claims to be critically engaged through visual examination. Physical interaction is always needed. Actual decision by the viewer is necessary which means that the outcome of the work will be according to what the viewer chooses to do. The viewer then becomes a user that, when accepting to interact with the work, enters a predefined space; a space, which puts them in a subordinated position. The artists appropriate the position of subjectivity so that the viewer becomes aware of how they can be predefined in daily setting according to a pre-set of concepts. The works are designed as interpolative devices for diverse issues that go beyond Latin America's art history—as defined so far. As shown above, they reposition the subordination of the subject.

In my view, then, what is important is that the selected artists shed light on how the subject should be defined in the process of experience itself. The works in *A Modular Framework* ask that viewers become actors and doers and thereby be willing to also become reframed as subjects in ways usually reserved for those expected to function as subordinates. It is the artists who decide how far the interactivity can go, just how the standing ideology does on subjects in daily life. This reversal for the artists, however, is done so that we become aware of the process of definition that takes place within discourse. They achieve this by disrupting cultural conventions. Skeptics of my propositions may respond that what I am saying about interactivity in all these works is inherent in all new media and digital art works. And that is exactly my point. This is one of the pivotal elements of new media and digital art: it demands that the viewer be turned into a user: an actor who quickly realizes that their choices within the context created by the artist is limited. Artists may be reprimanded for restricting the viewer with choices made for them. But artists do it to make users aware of this aspect of discourse, so that then the point becomes to define by actually doing within discourse. With modularity in

Investigation),” *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2006), 86.

digital culture, the ideological framework can be reconfigured. This is the principle behind *A Modular Framework*.