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Craft and Design in Latin America: Genuine or Artificial Exchange?

Preserving traditions amidst modernizing forces is a pervasive and on-going issue in Latin America. Beginning with colonialization, and followed by industrialization, finding room for the unique aspects of Latin American culture has always been a challenge. When attempts are made to hybridize these disparate sets of beliefs, practices, and histories, the effect often rings of simultaneous celebration and destruction. When modern outsiders seek to incorporate folklore imagery or indigenous craft practices into their work, it can come off as superficial or exploitative (considering the lost meaning derived from a new context). At the same time, incorporating indigenous crafts and imagery offers the opportunity to raise awareness about overlooked people and issues, as well as a chance to create social and economic changes for these people. Throughout Latin America's recent history, noble attempts to create these intersections have fallen short in a variety of ways. There are lessons to be learned from each of these projects, with the hopes that traditional craft can be celebrated and modernized in a way that is positive for all.

Walter Gropius and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, as leaders of the Bauhaus, argued for craftsmanship in conjunction with industrial production. They emphasized integration: not only of intellectual and manual skills, but between the fields of art and architecture. For instance, painters were encouraged to design the color schemes for architecture and interiors, using their specific expertise in compositional judgement. In this way, the artists' skills were being honored while also serving a "functional" need, emphasizing cooperation

and collaboration between each contributor. Along with a clear understanding of the “task of the machine”, this integration would help people lead more balanced lives where they could be more free to use their creativity (Adamson 554).

Within the Bauhaus' educational model, craft was used as a preparatory stage to mass production, because craft expertise requires a strong understanding of material and process. The founders of the Bauhaus believed strongly that design education required a return to the workshop and actually build their designs. While the Bauhaus is decidedly modernist, it recognized the importance of craft and hand knowledge. The pitfall is that many Bauhaus projects existed only at the crafted, small-scale level, and never reached mechanized production despite their intentions. This can partially be attributed to political and economic events of the time, but also the inherent differences between handcrafted and mechanically-made products (Adamson 556). A classic example is the textiles department of the Bauhaus, where figures such as Gunta Stolzl and Anni Albers created woven and printed designs that ultimately have been viewed as tapestries, even if they were intended to be upholstery fabric, rugs, or shirtcloth. The Bauhaus' stunted expansion is reflective of the wide range of factors that must coordinate to allow for mass production of goods: a a big gap to clear when starting from a handcrafted object.

Lina Bo Bardi took an interest in craft practices in Brazil amidst industrialization. She argues that Brazil actually has very little craftsmanship tradition: it is technically “pre-craftsmanship” since there are no established social structures (guilds, master/apprentice systems, workshops) to support the craft production (Bardi 12). Craft in Brazil is more quotidian rather than specialized: lots of people are making things by hand, but out of urgency and inventiveness rather than history and continuation. In this way, there are no

certain forms or materials unique to Brazilian craft, but rather a set of “creative possibilities” that distinguish their approach to making. She brings up the use of discarded products (once considered ‘finished’) as raw material for new ‘finished’ products. New products are made from materials such as rubber tires and tin cans, often with a keen sensibility of the material’s inherent properties and formal tendencies. In this kind of craft practice, the material is not used for a ‘junk aesthetic’, but out of necessity and resourcefulness. Rather, the aesthetic reflects the fact that “production and consumption do not reach all segments of a population”, which goes hand-in-hand with other difficulties the poor often face (Bo Bardi 33). When designing exhibitions of Northeastern Brazilian craft objects, Bo Bardi used this motivating force to guide the display of this work: rather than placing them in white boxes and forcing a purely aesthetic analysis, she mimics the look of markets and the natural environment to better express the context that necessitates such creativity, and multiple (rather than singular) nature of the production of these objects. Bo Bardi raised awareness of the creativity of the Northeastern Brazilians by using the clever and beautiful objects they make to draw attention to their overlooked and impoverished conditions.

Barauna is a furniture company based in Brazil that has found a way to combine fine craft with modern design. Founded in 1986 by architects Francisco Fanucci and Marcelo Ferraz, who wanted to work in the medium of furniture alongside their architecture practice. They produce a large line of furniture, some of which they have designed and some of which were designed by Lina Bo Bardi. The furniture is extremely well crafted, mostly out of native Brazilian woods, and made in a small workshop. There is a strong emphasis on the natural characteristics of different kinds of woods, both in regard to color and texture as well as

density and strength (<http://www.barauna.com.br>). This kind of material focus signifies a “craft approach” to making, where direct experience with the material informs the design. Yet at the same time, as modernist architects in Brazil, their furniture is also taking on the kind of cerebral and formal issues that belong to the modernist movement. Many of their pieces make clear the structural relations that underpin most furniture, in a similar way that tectonic aspects of architecture can be emphasized. In Barauna’s case, modernism is expanded through the realm of hand-crafted furniture, highlighting Brazil’s natural resources but not necessarily cultural traditions. Their work is a good example of how traditional materials can be used in a clean, simplified, and modern way: this could be applied in a number of materials and contexts to re-invigorate dying craft practices.

On the opposite side of “fine craft” is the Brazilian term “gambiarra”, which describes the realm of spontaneous design and improvised solutions. Many favela communities are constructed with gambiarra collages of discarded materials, jerryrigged electrical cords, and makeshift-but-functional workarounds (Sterling). Like Lina Bo Bardi’s articulation of the discarded product as raw material for craft, gambiarra is looked upon by some as an expression of the inventiveness and resourcefulness of these otherwise disadvantaged people. It also is a source of humor, as unlikely combinations of materials often point out the problem rather than conceal it. While these kinds of solutions can be unexpectedly clever, is difficult to distinguish if the laughter is about a surprising juxtaposition, or about some condescending ideas about the makers (that they are not smart enough to repair things correctly, are backwards, etc). This is where the dilemma about high-end objects that mimic this “make-do” mentality emerge: how do you ensure that the viewer or user is seeing gambiarra for what it really reflects about the people who create it?

Arte Povera, although primarily centered in Italy, raised similar questions about the value of manufactured goods and the definition of “finished” (“Zero to Infinity”). A group of artists working in the 1970s made most of their sculptural works out of readily available objects in seemingly unintentional arrangements, attacking industry and art institutions (Christov-Bakargiev 12). In Mario Merz’ “Igloo Nero”, a variety of planar materials are precariously attached to a metal dome using C-clamps. The piece is empty in places such that you might wonder if something was left out, and the clamps seems to be only a temporary solution, an un-ideal means to an end. Like some examples of gambiarra, the question of quality is raised: the sculpture seems makeshift even if highly considered and carefully assembled. Accumulation was also emphasized in some Arte Povera works: in Michelangelo Pistoletto’s “Venus of the Rags” a replica of an ancient sculpture faces an enormous pile of old clothing and discarded fabric. By contrasting the precious materials of classical sculpture with the unwanted goods from the trash, we question why one is valued over the other. Designed objects (using readymade materials) can also raise this question, and draw attention to the rampant wastefulness of mass consumption, perhaps better than works of art since they are not confined to a gallery or museum. While taking the everyday objects out of context allows us to look at them freshly, it can also make it more difficult to see how it connects to the “real” world.

Fernando and Humberto Campana question the value of cheap, plastic objects, but express it in a very different way. Their work makes reference to both the natural abundance of Brazil's landscape, as well as the diversity and inventiveness of the residents of Brazil's favelas by accumulating objects in unexpected furniture-formations. They often used pre-manufactured goods as raw material for their furniture pieces, reflecting the abundance of

cheap industrial goods in Sao Paolo's markets as well as the clever means of re-use that are found in favela communities. They speak of the bright colors of markets full of plastic goods as reflective of the festive and upbeat Brazilian spirit (Campana 47). Yet these pieces are primarily sold and shown in gallery settings in foreign markets, isolated from any sense of context or construction: the furniture does not actually reflect Brazilian inventiveness, because it is devoid of necessity or actual function (considering much of the furniture does not seem very comfortable or practical). Most of their work references native Brazilian craft, without really engaging in it. Though much of it is constructed by hand, it does not bring about the social changes that justifies the use of those techniques (much of their work is made in such small quantities as to only require a few craftspeople). Their "Favela" chair is precariously constructed of irregularly-shaped blocks of woods nailed together, referencing the stack-on-top-of-eachother nature of favelas but selling for about \$5000 ("constructed piece-by-piece from the same wood used to build the favelas, and every piece is hand-glued and nailed" a website selling this chair says). Other more limited edition pieces, such as the chairs constructed from stuffed animals and rag dolls, have sold for up to \$85,000. It is questionable how the awareness the Campana's raise about issues in Brazil measure up to the profit they are making from these objects.

A few of the Campana's projects have engaged with real communities of lower class Brazilians, namely Coopa Roca, a women's co-op in the Rocinha favela of Rio de Janeiro. This co-op was formed by Maria Teresa Leal, a sociologist who wanted to create a way to provide income to women in favelas who also have domestic responsibilities. In order to do this, the women produce hand crafts that can be worked on from home, and there is a strong emphasis on quality so that the finished goods can find their way into

high-end markets. Coopa Roca has successfully collaborated with a global array of fashion and industrial designers while simultaneously improving the quality of life for the women members as well as their families (Alvarado). Like similar efforts in other regions, the high price of these products comes from the labor involved rather than the rareness of the raw material. This way, the revenue is spread across more people who need income (and able to do a craft) rather than a few people who supply materials. Distinguishing labor-intensive vs. materials-intensive processes might be a way to raise the value of craft (and livelihood of craftspeople). It also differentiates the use of traditional practices as a display of cultural richness, rather than novelty (Paulicelli 164).

Oaxifornia is a similar project that intends to create social impact through the intersection of craft and design. The project is structured around the educational experience of short-term collaboration between American artists and designers and Oaxacan artisans. Working together in an experimental fashion, the artisans gain a better understanding of higher-end design markets, while the students gain a more thorough perspective of artisan life and Oaxacan culture. The short duration of the workshops allows for intense creativity and production, and often leads to many new and appealing ideas about the artisan's craft. But even with beautiful prototypes of these new products, and a well-attended public exhibition, there is often a disconnect for the artisans when it comes to actually establishing themselves in a high-end design market. There are many logistical issues around marketing their unique abilities and goods, procuring supplementary materials, clearly understanding orders and custom commissions, and delivering on the timeline of retailers. Consistency is also a concern, as "irregular" or "unfinished" do not always appeal to the high-end market. Once the workshop is over, it is all too easy to settle back in to making what they are used

to making, for stable subsistence is often more appealing than the risky, but potentially lucrative alternative. The intersection between traditional craft and the modern aesthetic could (and has occasionally) offer a real improvement of quality of life for the people who are directly involved in the production, but often it is lost in translation. Still, the idea of an equal exchange between designer and artisan is important when engaging in collaborative projects.

The gap between craft and design production is more than just the way the objects look or how they are made. Bridging the gap cannot entail simply applying the aesthetics of handi-craft in mass production, or modern styling to artisanal processes. Brazilian art historian Rafael Cardoso identifies craft and design as “complementary aspects of the same ongoing process of shaping experience through the interaction between people and things”, and the people he is referring to are not just users and consumers, but artisans, designers, manufacturers, and advocates (Adamson 321). Design can be as much about designing the specific nature of an object’s entrance into the world as the object itself: so that the object is an honest representation of the factors that facilitated its production. Modernizing craft practices needs to find new, practical patterns of production that actually have positive social implications for the people who are being represented by the work.

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