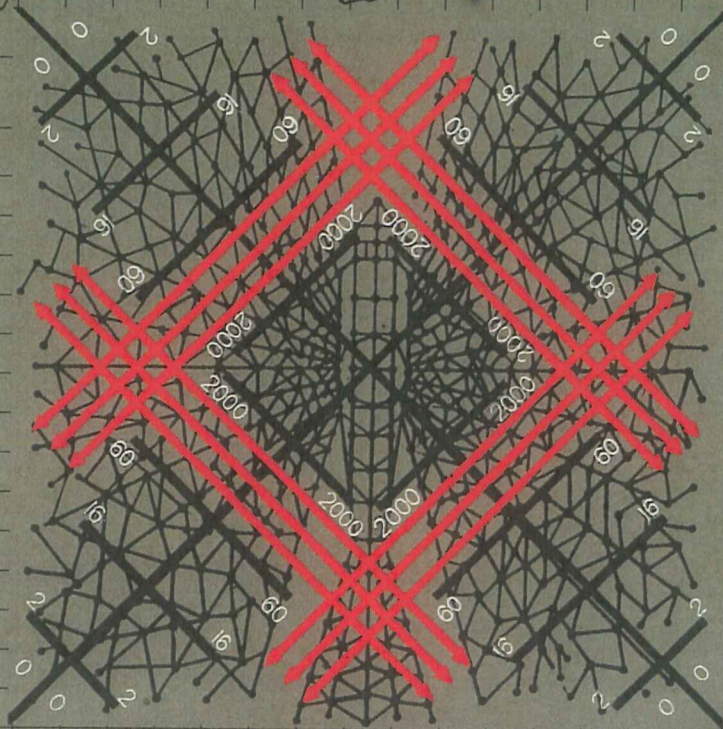


incorporating BLACK PHOENIX

THIRD TEXT

THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY ART & CULTURE



34

SPRING 1996

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Dis-mapping America

Miguel Angel Ríos' Maps

Mónica Amor

However, the form is chosen so that it is compatible with the contingency of all world descriptions.

Niklas Luhmann¹

There is no doubt that one of the most heated cultural debates of our decade was, and still is, the five-hundredth celebration of the 'discovery' of America in 1992. The event, renamed internationally as the 'Encounter of two Worlds', propelled an intense activity in the field of arts, literature and cultural criticism. It was precisely during this year that the Argentinean artist Miguel Angel Ríos embarked on a highly complex and sophisticated artistic project of broad formal and conceptual ramifications. Taking maps from the colonial period as his point of departure, Ríos' most recent series of work explores the slippage between artistic and scientific discourses while developing a sharp critique of the ideological implications of the cartographic discipline. Before devoting himself completely to this body of work, Ríos was also involved in recreating in his pieces the *kipu*, a method invented by Andean cultures in pre-Columbian times in which knotted strings were used to record memories, stories and computations. In *Untitled 1993*, for example, Ríos combined the *kipu* technique with western statistical procedures that use current data from the American continent. In this way, these works collapsed two different systems of signification on a gridded surface, although the grid itself remained as a background referent upon which a pleated canvas echoed it in a less systematized way. From then on, Ríos would take pleasure in the possibilities of disrupting the code of particular semantic structures such as charts and maps, while inscribing this disruption within an artistic practice of highly formal and semantic concerns.

Striped America from 1992 can be seen as an exercise that would lead to the more complex dis-mappings of 1993 and 1994. This piece is related to the *kipu*-based work since it keeps the verticality of the pleated canvas, a device that will remain constant in Ríos' art and which is intensively worked through in this piece to alter the smooth surface of the map and systematically fragment it. Here, the grid has literally disappeared although the orientation of the map and the

¹ Niklas Luhmann, 'European Rationality', in *ReThinking Imagination. Culture and Creativity*, G Robinson and J Rundell (eds), Routledge, London & New York, 1994, p 76.

verticality of the strips of canvas still evoke its presence as a point of reference for the definition of the map's spatial coordinates, as the 'working table' upon which so many rationalist discourses are predicated. Indeed, the grid is the quintessential modernist structure, not only in the realm of art but also in that of science and reason. The grid allows the abstraction of the 'real' upon a bi-dimensional surface, it is the way through which nature enters the cultural sphere, the domain of representation. As Rosalind Krauss has written,

The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)... for the artist who wished to enlarge his understanding of vision in the direction of science, the grid was there as a matrix of knowledge — the separation of the perceptual screen from that of the 'real' world.²

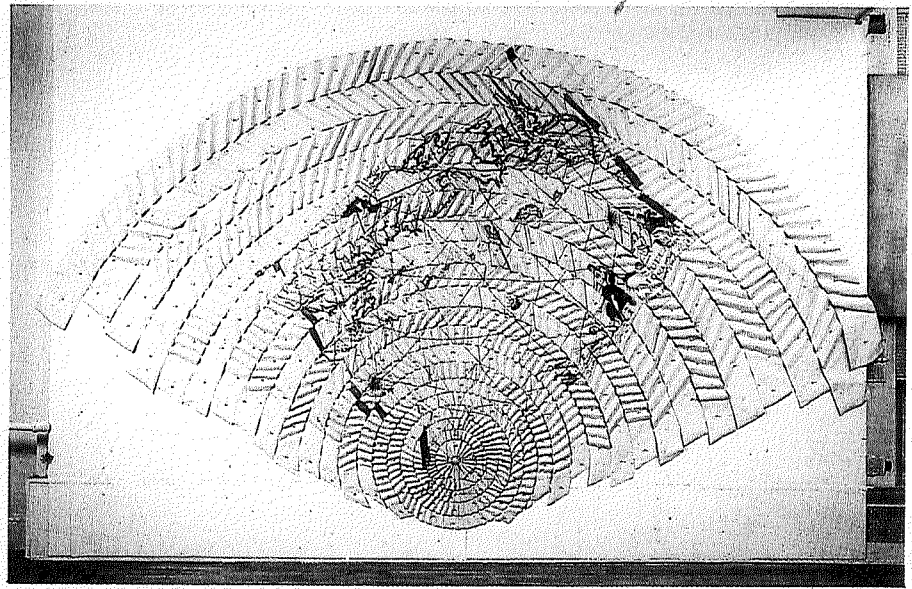
It is in that passing from the 'real' to the represented that Ríos' work locates the striping of America. In the constitution of the code, which constructs the graphic image of the continent, is deployed a variety of signifying devices predicated on colonial discourses. This assumption leads in his work to an intense disruptive practice that transgresses the semantic structure of cartography through the language of art. Indeed, one of the salient aspects of Ríos' maps is the way in which they take an intense pleasure in the manipulation of materials and other related artistic practices. Thus, the pleated canvas, not only opposes the flatness of the grid and the immediacy of the regular surface, but also recreates a subtle tri-dimensionality that can be associated with hand-crafted techniques and the slow process of working through the canvas instead of on the canvas. In this way, Ríos' maps contest the conventionality of the modernist flat surface and, at the same time, the scientific grid.

This attack on the surface of the map is enacted in different ways, and although Ríos will come back to the grid, always in the background as a point of reference, his most elaborated works are based on a juxtaposition of stripes in which the pleats create an interplay of opposing directions, so that the eye, in its search for a logical reading, is not allowed to rest and grasp the surface as a whole. *Plumed Crest* from 1993 is exemplary; here, an unsettling fan, pushing inward and outward, to the left and to the right, is constructed around a center from which no territory is mapped. Whatever the broken outline drawn inside the fan suggests, the wholeness of the iconic aerial image of land has disappeared in favour of a dynamic fragmentation of the surface, within which an irregular criss-crossing of lines substitutes the horizontal-vertical severity of the squared grid that serves as the foundation for the mapping of territories. In contesting the grid, which stands for the basic tool through which the 'real' territory becomes a representation, and in delivering an illegible image, this series of works underlines the arbitrariness of a process that is determined by a conventional code that responds to particular interests engendered by colonial discourses.

This gesture of disintegrating the surface of the map belongs with a series of others that deploy a dislodging process of representational conventions. They can be related to what Russian Formalism defined as 'making it strange' (*ostranenie*) and which, in its reconceptualization (what interests us here) by Bakhtin and Medvedev "...is based on certain displacements (*sdvigi*) and recombinations of semantic values... A transfer of ideological values occurs. The device itself would not exist if divorced from these values."³ In Ríos' work, it is precisely a displacement of the code which takes place in his reworking of the syntax articulating the signs of the map; signs constituted by the materiality of the

2 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. & London, 1985, pp 12-15.

3 M M Bakhtin and P N Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1991, p 61.



Plumed Crest, 1993, mixed media, 352 x 502 cm.

signifier (colours, shapes, materials) as much as by the conceptuality of the signified (colonial possession, new continent, *terra incognita*). And it is because it is through convention and codification that identification is produced between the signifier and the signified that Ríos' maps rethink this identity through a number of formal reversals. An alteration in form will consequently produce an alteration in meaning. A meaning that is always ideological, where ideology is understood by Bakhtin as,

...the set of reflections and refractions of social and natural reality that is held by the human brain and which the brain expresses and fixes through words, drawings, lines, or whatever signifying (*znakovo*) form. Ideologically: that is a sign, a word, a gesture, a graph, a symbol, etc.⁴

It is thus ideology which informs the constitution of symbolic representations in order to legitimize a 'given system of authority'. It is what makes the most salient signs in colonial maps to be those related with military, religious and commercial institutions, or what shrinks some areas while enhancing the depiction of others, or ultimately what obliterates the Indian villages while emphasizing the colonial settlements. But it is also imagination, which we tend to associate mostly with artistic and creative processes, that is crucial in the formation of individual as well as social representations.

It is appropriate to introduce here the concept of imagination as redefined by Paul Ricoeur. According to Ricoeur, the theory of metaphor, conceived not as "a deviant use of names" but as "a deviant use of predicates in the context of the sentence as a whole", produces "a sort of shock between different semantic fields". Then, by analogy, as "the metaphor is a new 'predicative pertinence'... imagining is first and foremost restructuring semantic fields"; imagination gives an image to an emerging meaning produced by the echoes and resonances generated from the use of unusual predicates. This linguistic turn allows Ricoeur

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin. The Dialogical Principle*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 1984, p 18.

to say that "we only see images in so far as we first hear them", a claim that does not, however, neglect the "workings of perception".⁵ Thus, as much as imagination plays a crucial role in the construction of 'reality', it also questions that 'reality', or better yet, the description of that 'reality'. A 'reality' already constituted through the code which establishes correlations between signs. The code which is analogous to the 'law', the 'rule'.

The deliberate emphasis upon the fragmentation of the surface in works like *Plumed Crest* and *Untitled 1994*, seeks to undermine not only the wholeness of the image, and thus its logical reading and cognitive function, but also the easy transportability of the instrumental map or the easel painting. It is in the gap between map and work of art, cartography and art, reason and imagination; that Ríos' project operates; usually by inscribing a critique of cartographic discourses within an artistic practice that celebrates the contingency of form and delights in the manipulation of materials, but also by deploying a double edged critique that subverts some of the principles of modern art: flatness, transportability, instantaneity. Thus, the installation of a work like *Untitled 1994* becomes a veritable process of manual labour resting upon human skill. Two circles (one diagonal to the other), constituted by five stripes of pleated canvas, reverberate in nine stripes of pleated canvas, juxtaposed until they reach a center formed by a piece of stretched and narrow canvas; this grows toward the corners of the diagonal opposite to that of the circles. A description of the shape of this work barely makes any sense, because it is precisely description that these works seek to undermine: description understood in spatial mapping as a mode of representation which operates as a "(masking of the) successive nature (of the territory) and present(s) it as a redundant repetition".⁶ And as much as a description of the shape of this work would always be inexact, the same seems to happen if we embark on the description of the territories to which these maps refer. This is particularly obvious in works like *Nor Water Neither Sand from 1994* in which the signifier has lost its conventional relationship to the referent, in part because the frame within which the original map was produced has been drastically altered. The green shape that seems to represent water fails to convince us among so many discontinuities and the absence of a solid body to stand for land. The suggested frame inside this shape, constituted by two concentric circles that seem to expand outwards, has been broken by the absence of pleated stripes to fill out the blank spaces between the two pleated circles and their reverberating stripes. Instead, a sharp red diagonal bisects the space of representation as if suggesting the arbitrariness upon which borderlines are always predicated.

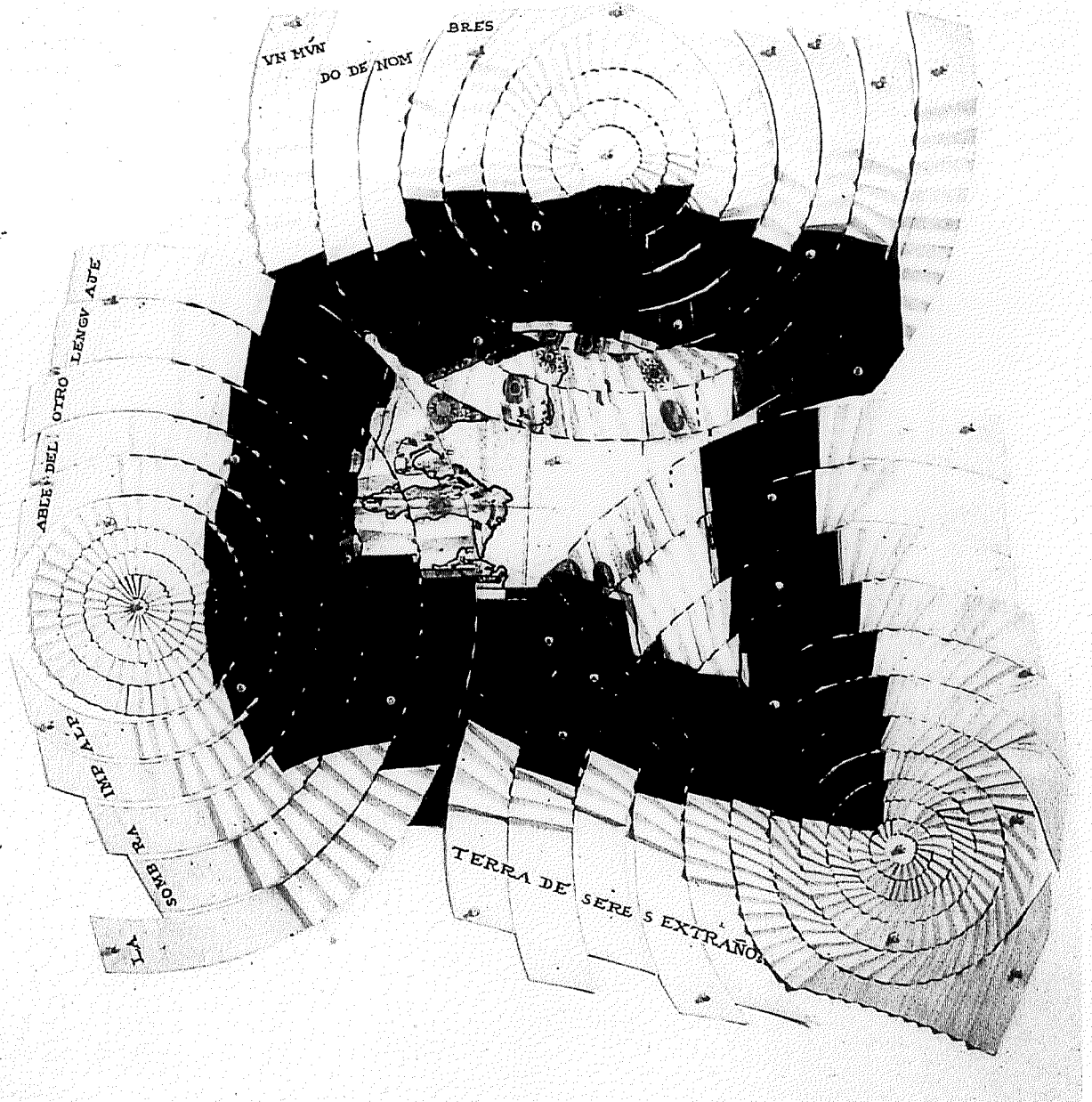
Illusion is shattered. The premise of the transparent window, articulated in cartographic and artistic practices such as classical perspective, which posits a subject at the center of a point of view from which whole discourses on art and science, history and power are produced, is contested. Thus, the interesting and intimate play of these works with both cartography and art; a play through which semantic values are displaced, codes disrupted and conventions stretched out and tested. Mostly it is the fixity of meaning, the absolute identity between signifier and signified that these works seek to dismantle. The binary oppositions we tend to encounter between science and art, reason and imagination, are put on hold, questioned and transgressed. No more transparency, objectivity, accuracy, neutrality or stable center. Instead of a grid, a pleated surface; instead of uni-directionality, a bursting of opposing orientations in space that lead nowhere, as in *The Impalpable Shadow* from 1994 where the absence of a stable center is replaced by a multiplicity of centers that undermine any privileged point of view. In its place, at the center of the surface, a process of disintegration in

5 Paul Ricoeur, 'Imagination in discourse and in action', in *Rethinking Imagination*, op cit, pp 118-135.

6 Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1984, p 202; quoted by Thomas F McDonagh, 'Situationist Space', *October* 67, MIT Press, Winter 1994, p 64.

relation to the territory that the original map depicts takes place. The emphasis is on the apparatus that sustains the construction of the map, whose crucial device is the unique point of view, the center from where the rest of the world is mapped. By multiplying the centers or points of view, what the work shows us (at its center) is a non-representable space, one that escapes any unique or correct

The Impalpable Shadow, 1994, paint on pleated cardboard, 117 x 117 cm.
Photo courtesy John Weber Gallery.



7 Bakhtin & Medvedev, op cit, p 49.

8 Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps*, The Guilford Press, New York & London, 1992, p 42.

9 J B Harley, 'Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe', *Imago Mundi* 40, 1988, p 62.

10 Craig Owens, 'Improper Names', in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles & Oxford, 1992, pp 285-286. Owens is referring here, as one can tell by the title of his essay, to Derrida's essay 'The Battle of Proper Names'. The kind of violence to which Owens relates the naming of the continent is explained by Derrida in the following terms: "There was in fact a first violence to be named... such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing..." in *Of Grammatology*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 1976, p 112.

representation. It is precisely a celebration of contingency and plurality, of the individuality of the 'utterance', that we find at the core of these works. *The Impalpable Shadow* posits three projections around three different centers which, although apparently constructed through a shared and similarly structured signifying system (stripes of pleated canvas, a Cibachrome reproduction of a fragment of a colonial map, painting, push pins attaching the stripes to the wall, words that name and define the absent territory), never converge on a coherent unified cartographic representation. Likewise, the rest of the works from this series also celebrate the irreproducibility of an exact projection, of a fixed object in space and time. Their variety of shapes, forms, materials, compositional arrangements, colours and the consequent semantic displacements, point towards the particularity, individuality and contingency of each of the colonial maps they refer to. They are permeated by the specific social, cultural and historical contexts in which they were produced. Both works of art and maps emerge from particular 'sites of enunciation'; these operate according to an internal logic that produces meaning through a set of conventions in articulation with the specific circumstances (bounded to the subject) that generate the unique utterance. What allows us to identify art as art and map as map is the social, and thus collective, convention that informs the construction of the object (through usage, tradition, 'reiteration' and 'cultural distention') — a convention that resides in a particular syntax or way of structuring the constituent signifying elements. (Thus, for example, in a map we distinguish between figure [land] and ground [water], whereas in a Ríos' work such as *Plumed Crest*, *Untitled 1993*, or *The Awakening of Words*, this is not the case; or we expect a map to be portable, printed or drawn upon a unified surface and not fragmented as with Ríos' maps; or, we expect maps to have a particular instrumental value which these works of art do not have.) We could read Ríos' work as displacing the code, reconfiguring the semantic field, and 'deconstructing' the convention upon which colonial maps were predicated by way of an intimate play with artistic structures. It is this second level (artistic) *construction*, based on a reversal of cartographic conventions, which permits an assessment of the semantic shifts operating in Ríos' work, because "...the constructive significance itself... has a purely semantic character".⁷

The displacements produced by Ríos' work upon the grided surface and the central point of view — both basic structural features of the map — belong to that operation which we can define, following Bakhtin, as 'semantic reconfiguration'. Other gestures pertain to the same project; they act upon an array of devices used by colonial maps to represent the colonized territories. "A variety of modes", writes Dennis Wood, "ranging from the linguistic through the logographic to the purely pictorial — and including mixtures of each — were used to record qualitative and quantitative information in both spatial and temporal dimensions."⁸ The development of this system of signification responds to the constitution of a cultural code that enabled the correlation of the signifier (a ship) and the signified (nautical route). A procedure that underwent selection and organization as the product of military campaigns, the charting of trade routes, the exploration of new territories, and the expansion of the Luso-Hispanic empires. As J.B. Harley points out,

The situation in both Portugal and Spain early in the sixteenth century suggests that the rulers of the nation-states of Europe, together with their rising bourgeois merchant classes, were not slow in discovering the value of centralized control in trying to ensure the confidentiality of geographical knowledge about the New World.⁹

11 The term is Derrida's concept in addressing that unmistakable western sense "which at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign". He adds, "I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, an irrepressible desire for such a signified". A signified that for Derrida is unattainable through a system of signs 'be it linguistic or graphic), because as Peirce has shown, "the indefiniteness of reference [is] the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible. The thing itself is a sign...", a re-presentation; different, that is, from "the originary presentation of the thing itself". Derrida, op cit, p 49.

12 Although the name of *Venezuela* has entered the official history as meaning Little Venice, it is interesting to note that in Spanish the diminutive is produced by adding to a word the suffix *ita* ('je *Venezuelita*) for the feminine and *ito* for the masculine. The suffix *uela* on the other hand, is usually added to words with derogatory connotations. I am grateful to the Venezuelan artist Meyer Vaisman for calling my attention to this fact.

The mapping enterprises of the Portuguese and Spanish empires involved an arbitrary demarcation of limits and frontiers that wiped out already defined cultures in the interests of imperial expansion. At the same time, the naming of the 'new' continent meant the effacing of native designations. A typical case is evoked by Craig Owens:

In 1499 Amerigo Vespucci, sighting the northern coast of the continent which will eventually bear his name, sees houses on stilts that appear to float on water or to hang suspended from trees. He is reminded of Venice and immediately names the place *Venezuela* — little Venice — thereby obliterating its Indian name and instituting in its place a proper (ie Spanish) name. Thus 'Venezuela' is inscribed within a system of cultural associations and values — mercantilism, cosmopolitanism, Christianity — that is entirely foreign to it, and henceforth its name will testify to, but also cover over the traces of, the violence implicit in this — or any — historical act of denomination.¹⁰

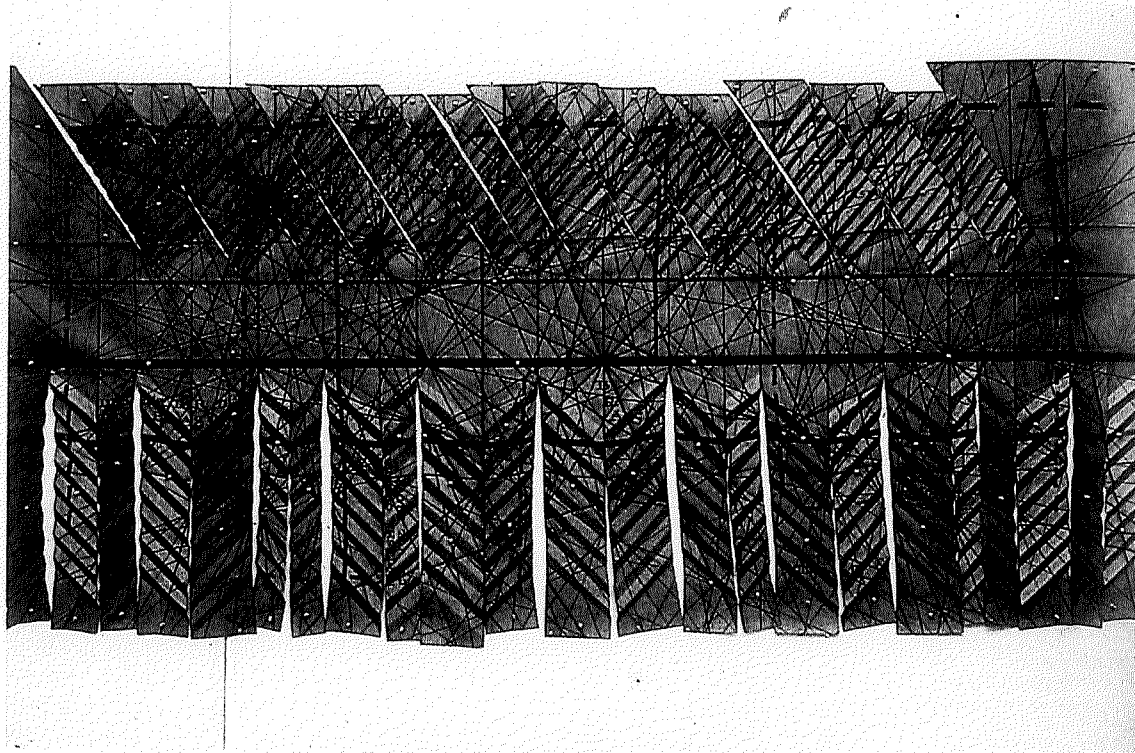
It is to the relevance and preponderance of the name that *Plumed Crest*, among other works, testifies. In this work, the referenced territory has lost conventional representability, legibility, and in its place, the name of *Venezuela* becomes the only clearly (and necessary) recognizable denomination. Thus, the land as such disappears in a shattered outline that pushes to an extreme the already abstracting foundation of cartography. The name of *Venezuela*, on the other hand, remains readable, complete, almost whole; it stands for the signifier that best identifies with the "transcendental signified",¹¹ namely the 'Venezuelan' landscape itself, inscribed through the 'proper name' within a European colonial discourse that describes, classifies and differentiates its colonies *vis-à-vis* western standards. Identity is conceived as "the abstract moment of the concept"; and *Venezuela*, little Venice, is immediately perceived as derivative, a minuscule Venice with no past but an origin determined by the European 'discovery'.¹²

The effectiveness of words, of 'proper names', to signify finds a parallel in the effectiveness of cartographic signs to convey information. Thanks to the code, socially constituted, and easily graspable in the first stages of map production, where the sign retained an iconic relationship to the referent, the cartographic image is perceived as transparent, objective, scientific.¹³ As J.B. Harley points out,

State cartography was thus, in the sixteenth century, well on the way to becoming a scientific and technological discourse. Contained within it was the unwritten assumption of an objective world in which new techniques, being repeatable and transmissible, were always able to be successful in measuring or describing accurately.¹⁴

Upon a world divided by parallels and meridians, and by using 'a few standard signs', territories are mapped through a logic of continuity and uniformity. As a consequence of a process of increasing abstraction and generalization, the individuality of the landscape is obliterated. As with language, differentiation takes place within a limited system of representation and never outside of it.

It is to this lack of 'qualitative differentiation' in the representation of the colonized territories that a work like *The Awakening of Words* from 1994 refers. In this work, the signifier standing for the mapped territory — the outline that describes its shape — has completely disappeared and all that remains are traces of the signifying system deployed in the construction of the cartographic image. Indeed, of all the works from the maps series this, together with *Terra Incognita* from 1992, is probably the most abstract. All that remains of the map is a criss-



The Awakening of Words, 1994, charcoal and acrylic on pleated cardboard,
152 x 305 cm.

crossed surface, in which a couple of points remind us of the windrose used by navigators to determine the direction of winds and thus facilitate the charting of routes. But here, the rhumb lines of the nautical chart, as a fragment of a whole, contest the order and regularity upon which charts and maps are predicated to orient the viewer. The 'New World' is reduced to a mesh of lines and words, basic elements of the structure from which a historically constructed America emerges. Names like Brazil, Mexico, Peru and America are scattered across the surface without any binding referent, but sufficiently encoded to make present the absent territories. Here, the disruptions performed on the material support of the work, which has been cut with a sharp tool, echo a more violent attack on the surface. But the gesture of cutting the cardboard is not arbitrarily performed since it responds to that regularity upon which the map is predicated. Thus the upper part of the work presents diagonal cuts that divide half of the piece into sixteen stripes, while the lower part presents vertical cuts that divide the other half into nineteen stripes. This violent regularity imposed upon the materiality of the work is structurally correlated with the distortions and misrepresentations to which the mapped territories were subjected.

But beyond this discursive critique deployed by Ríos' work, what we find in *The Awakening of Words* is first and foremost a delicate cardboard surface, meticulously worked, upon which the artist performs a highly crafted task. The support, thoughtfully arranged so that its pleats create a subtle visual play, is the product of an artistic performance that delights in the manipulation, construction and use of materials. Among the different supports used in Ríos'

13 However, we know from the study of art history that even pictorial images of an iconic character are constituted according to conventions of representation. As Wood points out, "...without our conventions of pictorial rendering... image[s] would be opaque and meaningless... It [the image] emerges from a tradition of representation that is distinctly western and intensively codified, and it speaks through a familiar (to us) regime of symbolic principles: lines demark intersections of planes and boundaries between solid and void: certain organizations of lines denote rectilinear volumes; recurring tonal patterns denote illuminated forms". Moreover, iconic signs in colonial maps are represented by "virtue of a part for a whole substitution", 'a group of uniformed men meant colonial settlement, a boat meant nautical route, and so on). A similar operation is enacted by Ríos who, by acting not upon 'reality' but upon the map itself, presents us only with a part of the whole. This is the case in *The Impalpable Shadow* in which the regular division of the surface and the proportioned distribution of space acquires a radical dimension in relation to the conventional map to which its centre refers. This gesture undermines the spatial convention according to which our mind organises signifiers "into something whole" and meaningful. Denis Wood, op cit, p 117.

14 Harley, op cit, p 65.

works, we find paper, cardboard, canvas, and Cibachrome. This last material dialogically contests the uniqueness of the manuscript which served as support for the first maps; but at the same time, those works, such as *South America* from 1993, that use Cibachrome on pleated canvas, are precisely the most vulnerable of all. It is through this gesture that Ríos' works manage to incorporate a mass reproduction technique to displace the semantic value of both the original manuscript to which the photograph refers (which loses its uniqueness through reproduction) and the potentially unlimited reproducibility of the photograph (which acquires a unique quality through its incorporation into the work of art). Thus a work like *Untitled 1994*, with its synchronized ripples, its harmonious play of directions and its complex symmetry, disrupts the legibility of the map as map but inscribes the cartographic image within a dynamic structural play that responds to western notions of harmony and symmetry. The yellow and red lines that cut the image horizontally and the tricolour circles, diagonal to each other, derive in part from the original map and are partly painted by the artist who juxtaposes the smooth surface of the Cibachrome with the impasto of painting. By painting the circles and parallel lines of the map onto the black Cibachrome surface, the work extends the most abstract feature of the rationalist utterance into the artistic (legitimately abstract)¹⁵ utterance.

At the same time that these works disrupt the code of the map by attacking its structure (centers, grids, continuity of outline, uniformity of space, systematic abstraction) they push back the possibility of grasping the 'transcendental signified', the territory that the map intends to represent. Through formal reversals, they undermine the possibility of apprehending the object as a whole,¹⁶ as "already visually present, fully offered to full view" because such an omnipresent view is seen from nowhere:

...it is in fact impossible to occupy this space... a no place not outside space but nowhere, utopic. This is the traditional condition of the map, in linguistic terms it is pure structure (*langue*) without individuation (*parole*).¹⁷

It is to the structure of *parole*, also defined by Bakhtin as utterance, that we can analogically relate Ríos' series of maps.

These works have recourse to many of the elements that constitute the map: lines, colours, text, shapes, figures and so on. However, by reconstructing them on the basis of a different syntax (different to the cartographic syntax), they differentiate themselves from the more systematic foundation of maps. What is interesting is that what these works underline, through their dialogical relationship to colonial maps, is that maps themselves are a kind of unique utterance as well. The difference lies in the fact that maps are predicated on "a general logic of sign systems", whereas works of art move within a semantic field of more flexible values.¹⁸ Both colonial maps and Ríos' works are utterances, they are inscribed within particular 'sites of enunciation' and at the same time respond to the internal logic of the system within which they operate: an internal logic that is socially structured so that information can be transmitted and meaning shared collectively. Thus, we can locate colonial maps along an axis constituted by sixteenth century workshops, nautical instrumentality and imperialist and scientific discourses; and Ríos' works can be inscribed within a network constituted by studio, museum and discourses on contemporary criticism and postcolonial critique. Although maps can be associated with the 'reiterative', since they are predicated upon a unified logic, they share something of the uniqueness that we tend to attribute to utterances. Why? because the constitution of a code is discursive, the construction of the map depends on choices that define the

15 What I intend to suggest here is that the artistic utterance is easily related to abstraction because it tends to be associated with the imagination, the irrational and the anti-systematic. On the contrary, it is less common to think of instrumental and systematic signs as abstractions since we tend to identify them with the thing they represent.

16 One case in point is the already mentioned synchrony of the ripples in *Untitled* 1994. While we read these ripples as harmonious within the work as art, they disrupt the synchrony necessary to read the outline of the shape of the landscape as a complete figure.

17 Marin, op cit, p 202, quoted by McDonagh, op cit, p 64.

representational devices that will convey the information, conceived as truth, endorsed by the producers of maps. This results in a "cognitive infrastructure... [that] determines the nature of the technical specification of maps and provides the rules of what is included and excluded on a map".¹⁹

The lack of instrumentality of these objects is a recurring motif present in all the work in the series. We have seen how the functionality of the map is constantly transgressed by manipulating the cartographic image through the use of artistic devices such as composition, colour, the juxtaposition of a variety of materials, the use of different techniques, manual intervention, and so on. An exemplary image related to *The Awakening of Words* is *Terra Incognita* from 1992. Contrary to what its title indicates, no fragment of land is represented in this work. We find a complex criss-crossing of lines and a meticulous pleated surface that reverberates outwards. The center of this striped circle has been displaced towards the north, leaving a void that can be related to the absence of land. No center, no land. In the absence of the latter what stands out in this piece is the text that crowns the upper part of the circle (north) and its left (west) and right (east) sides. The first one reads *terra nova* and the last two *terra incognita*. Here, too, the text substituting the re-presented landscape is used to underline the way in which language inscribes whole territories within signifying structures alien to the object represented. Thus, if we conceive of this work within the series of maps that we have been studying here, *terra nova* and *terra incognita* cannot but refer to 'America'. Both denominations were alien to the continent they refer to; it was 'new' and 'unknown' to the West but not to native population. Terms like *terra incognita* appealed to the imagination of the colonizers who thought of the 'new' territories in terms of material resources and land to conquest and exploit. But before achieving the rewards, the colonizers had to intrude into this land of darkness, into this shadow that had to be discovered and reconstructed as a whole, physically and conceptually. It was here, within an intimate play between anticipation and observation, that the imagination of the explorer projected its desires and expectations upon the blank spaces of the map that signifying *terra incognita*. A space that invited the intrusion of the colonizer, that promoted the bravery and heroism of the explorer.

This appeal to the imagination finds its way in *Terra Incognita*. By invoking land in its title, the work invites the viewer to fill in the displaced center from which the mapping of the *terra nova* is structured, we are propelled to deploy our imagination and re-present what ultimately remains an unknown territory, because that ubiquitous place from which the continent is portrayed is nowhere existent. It is as nowhere existent for us as it was nowhere existent for the map-makers of the colonial period. Thus imagination operates in front of the blank spaces of the work of art as much as in front of those of the manuscript. At this basic level, "...imagination is the power (the capacity, the faculty) to make appear representations... In other words: imagination is the power to make be that which 'reality' is not..."²⁰ This implies, following Castoriadis, giving a form to something which "...in itself has no relation with that form". This form is constituted by color, shape, texture, size and so on, qualities that are conditioned but not caused by "an 'external' X" which is "generically and socially shared". *Terra Incognita* underlines precisely that interplay between the individual and the collective, between the viewer that represents to him/herself, a side we on which we can also locate the artist, and the map-maker who represents to the West. It also posits ours, the artist's and the map-maker's points of view, each as one among many; it inscribes the center within a multiplicity (of viewers) "among which there is, at first glance, no privileged one"; and Castoriadis adds,

...at second glance, the only 'privileged' one — philosophically and, I would add, politically — is the one which made itself capable of recognizing and accepting this very multiplicity of human worlds, thereby breaking as far as possible the closure of its own world."²¹

18 It is worth quoting Bakhtin here to understand the difference he establishes between language ('*langue*') on one hand and utterance ('*parole*'), also related to discourse and text, on the other. "Every system of signs 'that is, every 'language' no matter how limited the collective that adopts it by convention, can always be, in principle, deciphered, that is, translated into other sign systems ('other languages'); therefore, there exists a general logic of sign systems, a language of languages, potential and unified... But a text 'as distinct from language as a system of means) can never be fully translated, because there is no text, potential and unified.'" M M Bakhtin, 'The problem of text in linguistics, philology and the other human sciences. An essay of philosophical analysis' *Voprosy literatury* 10, 196, pp 281-307, quoted by Todorov, *op cit*, p 26. It is according to this logic that, in a first moment, we can associate maps with language and Ríos' work with utterances. On a second instance, however, these works undermine this polarity through an intertextuality that points towards the discursive character of colonial maps, which can also be considered as utterances responding to the particular interest of the colonial enterprise.

19 Harley, *op cit*, p 66.

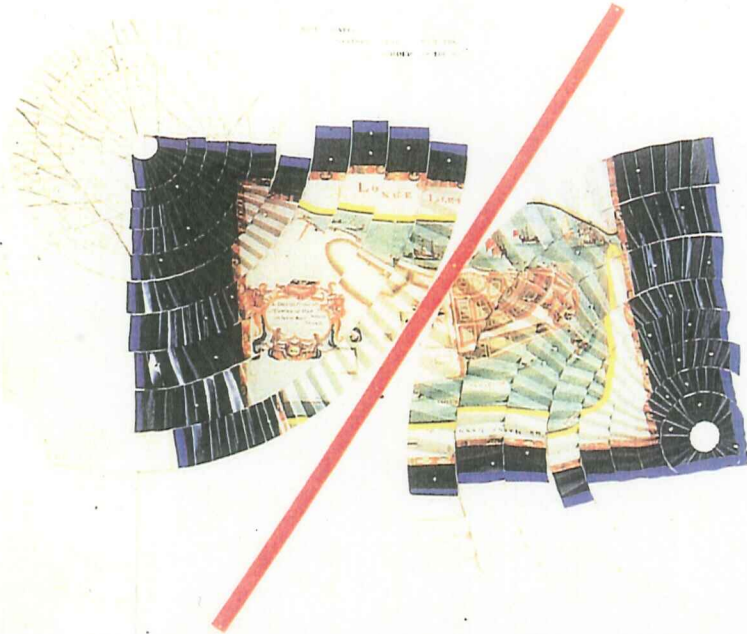
20 Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary', in *Rethinking Imagination*, *op cit*, p 139.

21 *Ibid*, p 142.

It seems fair to suggest that Ríos' work explodes and opens up this 'closure of the world' structurally and morphologically. His anti-systematic pieces of enormous compositional fluidity assert, through the incorporation of the cartographic utterance, the contingent quality of the map whose surface is organized according to projections that 'can obey any rule', that can be 'endlessly combined... stretch on forever'. Thus, there is no *natural* logic to the shape, the sizes, the scale, the proportions and directions structured by either colonial maps or Ríos' work. However, in the latter, distortions are overtly deployed upon the cartographic utterance so that not one of these pieces responds to the conventional frame of the map. In *The Impalpable Shadow* and *Nor Water Neither Land*, for example, the rectangular frame has collapsed in a reverberation of ripples that denies the idea of enclosure that it usually declares. The overwhelming size of some of these works is another of the resources put in play by the artist. A work like *Plumed Crest*, for instance, envelops the viewer, absorbs us within its corporeal limits, contesting the imputation of the manuscript. The reading of the 'map' is thus disrupted not only at the semantic level but also at the perceptual level. The enormous size of the piece undermines the all-presentness of the map and expands outwards, escaping the (in control) view of the spectator — as does land itself.

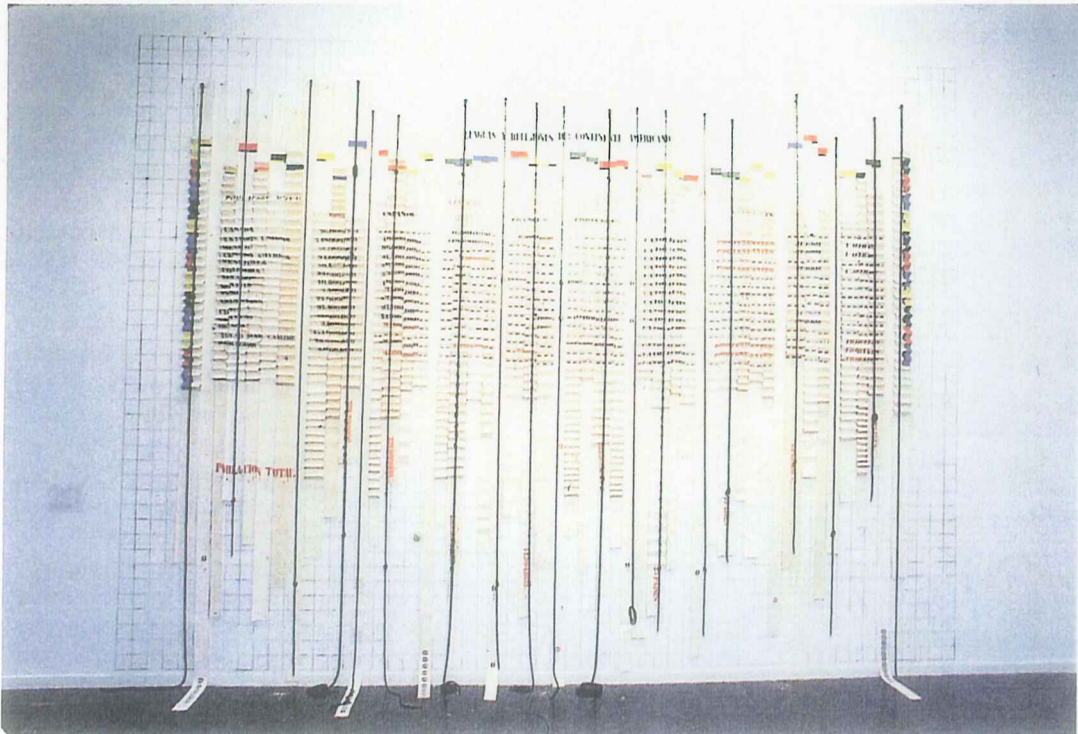
The disjunctive proposal that runs through the form and structure of these works is enhanced in *Untitled 1993* by the unequal proportions of the cartographic utterance and the shiny pleated surface. Here, the center is constituted by a very small fragment of a map, while the rest of the work can be read as an abstract composition of brilliant colours and worked surface. But the orientation of maps is one of the most transgressive features of the work. Maps were, and still are, the product of a continuing effort to master reality, to orient the subject in space and time. Thus, the morphological pluri-directionality of these works, which are constantly breaking the possibility of a 'logical' reading, and the continuity of outline, of surface, evade the task of fixing the position of the subject, be it as a reader of geographies or as a spectator of quintessential modern art. Because by introducing the cartographic utterance, by fragmenting the surface and breaking the frame, Ríos' work also undermines the grasping immediacy of the absolutely self-referential object.

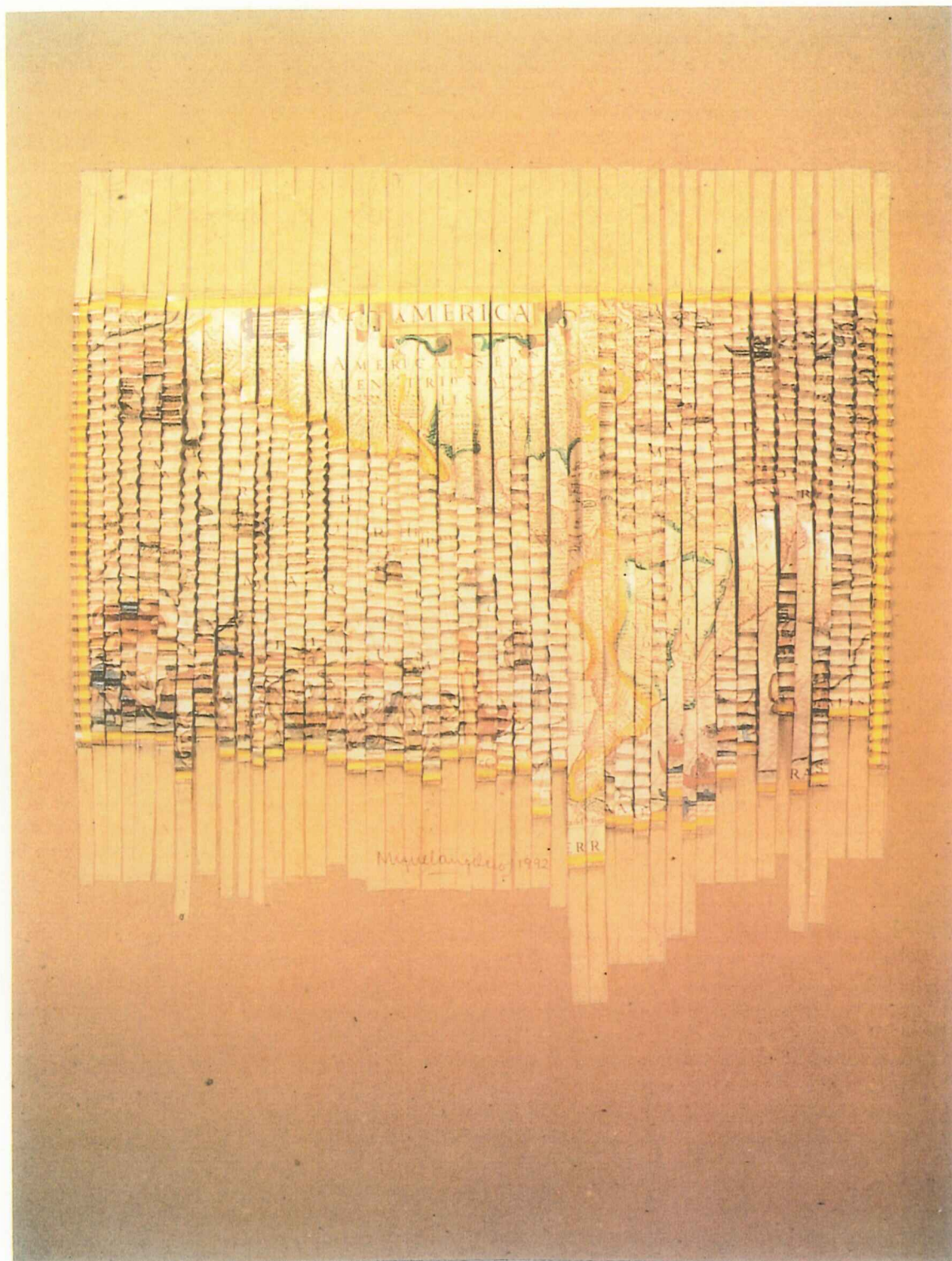
This reconfiguring of the constitutive elements of cartography has a number of functions. It proceeds by inscribing semantic reversals that alter the scientific structure upon which colonial maps are predicated. By altering the syntax of cartography, Ríos' work underlines the individual quality of these objects, always embedded in very particular contexts; a condition that allows us to relate them to the linguistic notion of 'utterance'. The way in which fragments of colonial maps are incorporated in these works — juxtaposed with the still more personal artistic utterance (which displaces the fixed internal code of cartography) — emphasizes the way in which a clear-cut division between reason (cartography's foundation) and imagination (art's foundation) is not possible. It is at this level, in the collapsing of defined, unified, coherent, fixed signifying systems and forms that the undermining of the polarity between reason and imagination operates. This disintegration of the absolute distinction between both terms overthrows the concept of reason as the foundation that gives 'unity and certainty' to the 'world view'. It questions the privileged position of the observer, the construction



Not Water Neither Sand, 1994, Cibachrome and oil on pleated canvas, 147 x 287 cm. Photo courtesy John Weber Gallery.

Untitled, 1993, mixed media, dimensions unknown. Photo courtesy of The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.





Striped America, 1992, mixed media, dimensions unknown.

of an opposite "made for convergence" and according to which "...rationality itself can be made the component of a distinction, whose other side must then be something irrational — for example enjoyment, fantasy, imagination".²²

It is this undoing of the polarity between reason and imagination which one is tempted to inscribe within a deconstructive practice that I have been trying to suggest. Indeed, in suspending the idea of reason as the foundation of cognition and truth, these works, through the formal reversals outlined above, question the authority of the map, of the sign, to deliver a 'transcendental signified'. The concept is Jacques Derrida's in his formulation of a critique of a "historico-metaphysical epoch" characterized by its search for presence. The transcendental signified refers to "the final reference", to anything that is conceived of in "the sense of being as present": presence which is also linked to "truth" and "the production of ideal objectivity".²³ The map, in its effort to master reality and make present the landscape to which it refers, is grounded in this logocentric metaphysics. It functions according to paradigms of 'totality', 'continuity' and 'decontextualization'. And it is this logic, predicated upon a "formal doctrine of conditions", which Ríos' series of maps puts "under erasure" to use another Derridean concept — one that belongs to a deconstructive enterprise which seeks to undermine not only the false identity between signifier (the constitutive marks of the map) and signified (land), but also the founding logic of the system which polarizes reason and imagination, that assumes that it is reason that informs the cartographic utterance and delivers it as objective and scientific. This attack on the logic of the system, on its closed structure, promotes a 'crisis of the logos', of the convention through which meaning is created. It produces, in the series of works we have been looking at, a play of the inside and the outside that takes place within the numerous gaps generated by the rupture of the frame, the irregularity of shapes, the fragmentation of the grid, of form, of surface, by the introduction of the cartographic utterance. Within this fragmentation we can recognize in these works an effort to rethink semantic structures, to open up the internal construction of systems and promote the possibility of reshaping contingent boundaries. At the core of this artistic project there is a constant undoing of those polarities that think 'reality' in terms of absolutes. Ríos' series of maps seeks to permeate closed structures and given notions of cognition. Reason and imagination, art and science are thought "different but complementary", dialogically related, contextually conditioned, "the cultural infrastructures of interpretation, as it were".²⁴ As art itself they are irreducible, anti-essentialist, embedded, that is, in their time and space.

22 Luhmann, 'European Rationality', op cit, p 67.

23 Derrida, op cit, p 43.

24 Johann P Arnason, 'Reason, Imagination, Interpretation' in *Rethinking Imagination*, op cit, p 162-163. "The conceptual shift is... such", adds Arnason, "that we can more easily relate the phenomena in question to a context rather than a subject, and to culture rather than consciousness. It also serves to broaden the frame of reference and the field of application. We can talk about the modern or the capitalist imaginary, [his substitution for imagination], the Islamic or the communist imaginary, without running the risk of constructing meta-actors or macro-subjects, and we can talk about — or at least raise the question of — the rationality [his substitute for reason] of traditions and world-views, the rationality of magic or the rationality of systems, without imposing a preconceived and normative identity on all those disparate horizons."

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