



Jamie Hilder

Reading Mario García Torres at the Berkeley Art Museum

In his two slide installations *Whatever Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger* (2007) and *Je ne sais si c'en la cause* (2009), Mario García Torres documents works that had previously been inadequately documented: Martin Kippenberger's *Museum of Modern Art Syros (MOMAS)*, a project Kippenberger created while he vacationed in Greece in the early 1990s, and the murals and mosaics Daniel Buren made at the Grapetree Bay Hotel on the US Virgin Island of St. Croix in the early 1960s. Recognizing that methods of documentation necessarily influence a work's character, Torres inserts himself into both histories, using the process as both homage to the artists and a critique of art historical discourse. He positions his approach against that of the "institutional researcher"—the art history Ph.D. candidate or critic trying to break new ground—who has, up to this point, failed to record these significant works to an acceptable standard. The installation of Torres's pieces evokes a didactic mood: the regular clicking sound of the projectors and the darkness of the gallery signal a space of learning to anybody who began their art history education prior to PowerPoint.

Torres attaches narratives to both pieces. In *Whatever Doesn't Kill You...*, it comes in the form of subtitles on the slides describing his project in Syros: how he found a municipal wastewater treatment plant on the site where MOMAS operated and how he installed work of his own inside the plant. The account of his and Kippenberger's work is preceded by a description of Syros that covers the bare historical facts one might find in a tourism brochure—how the main industry is ship building and textile based, how it is rumoured that the pre-Socratic thinker Pherecydes invented the sundial there—and Torres's own observations about the island's character. The transition between the treatment of Syros and that of MOMAS is awkward, though: *In the early 1800s*

the island saw the beginning of the Greek State and, with it, the birth of several modern institutions. / Among them was the Archaeology Museum which displays some of the archaeological findings of Syros. / Bumping into what once was a modern art museum in these latitudes could be claimed an archaeological discovery as well. / The following tale is actually not an ancient one, as this narrative might suggest. / But one that could be telling about the way culture has been publicly discussed in the last few decades.

As writing, separate from the slides, which are primarily snapshots of the town of Syros and its surroundings, the passage moves too quickly between the development of a nation-state, its modern institutions (one institution in *particular*), and a convenient discovery of a modern art museum (the museum Torres went to Syros in order to visit, which seems hardly as serendipitous as "bumping into" implies). The contingencies of the repeated "coulds" serve to weaken the passage, as if there were ample opportunity to *not* see the modern art museum as an archaeological discovery, or that the discovery could potentially add *nothing* to an interrogation of how culture is discussed. If this is Torres's position on history—that in order to subvert the putative authority of art historical discourse one might instead concentrate on vicissitudes or an individual's poetic experience of space—I think he might be both overestimating the immovability of institutionalized historical discourse and naively valourizing the subject who attempts to escape that discourse. Challenges to history are not as rare as his project assumes, nor are they automatically beneficial.

The narrative in *Je ne sais si c'en la cause* comes primarily via a song that accompanies two slide projections. A single black-and-white slide of a resort swimming pool on a tropical coastline, with two sunbathers conversing by the pool, fills one wall, while a series of colour images of Daniel Buren's dilapidated murals and mosaics on small bungalows and hotel walls that appear half destroyed, half neglected, is projected adjacently. The scene depicted in both projections, though separated by almost fifty years, is the Grapetree Bay Hotel on the US Virgin Island of St. Croix. Buren received the commission to decorate the resort shortly after he graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers d'Art, Paris, in 1960. Buren's family

had a business relationship with the resort owner's lawyer, Thibault de Saint Phalle, who was responsible for much of the legal and financial manoeuvring required for the resort to open.

The song begins with a man's voice, speaking English in a somewhat dubious French accent, giving a nostalgic account of The Grapetree Bay Hotel and its difficult past. The writing is again in the lyrical tourist brochure idiom, with some subtle translation difficulties: *On the southeastern coast of St. Croix is what once was called The Grapetree Bay Hotel. Its remains have decayed over the years, the decades. . . . The Grapetree Bay was part of the new continental enthusiasm [pronounced "en-TOO-zee-azm"]; one could say that the story of the hotel is surrounded by deceptions and disappointments. Even before it opened its doors in the early 60s, the enterprise was already the motive of legal and economic disputes.*

The voice goes on to describe the current state of the resort, again combining superficial socioeconomic facts about St. Croix, such as the devastation wrought by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, with an account of how a visitor, who we can only assume is Torres, feels in the space of the abandoned resort. It ends with an allusion to Buren's murals and mosaics, standing witness, like the building that now occupies the space of Kippenberger's MOMAS, to a march of history bent on ignoring them.

When the voice finishes, a drum beat comes full into the front of the mix, and the organ, which had been in the background, intensifies. A woman's voice begins singing in French about feeling unsettled while working in an odd place; the lyrics are based on a letter Buren wrote upon returning to St. Croix in 1965 to complete the works, where he was confronted by works of his with which he could no longer identify. This is part of the popular history of the murals and mosaics, that the first works represent a younger, more naïve Buren who was trying to combine his Western influences, like Picasso or Matisse, with the Mexican muralists he had discovered in school. The later pieces departed from these concerns and are less figurative; some critics argue that the iconic stripes Buren is known most for are identifiable in embryo in this second batch.

Torres decided to produce a song and an album cover for the piece upon discovering an

album featuring the steel band musician Pedrito Altieri that the hotel produced as part of its promotional campaign. He enlisted his friend, the musician Mario López Landa, to compose it, while he wrote the voice passage and the lyrics. Torres describes the record as an attempt to promote the hotel in its current, run-down condition: a reaction to the Altieri record but also an updating of it, replacing the good-time tone of Calypso with the rhetoric of failure and discomfiture.¹ While the lyrics certainly fulfill that function, the music seems to quote more from Chicago in the 90s and a lounge music-like contemporary R&B—a Latin bistro-rock-funk hybrid—than any current Caribbean music. Although in the sense of failure and invasion, Torres and Lopez's tourist rock might be a better fit for addressing the resortification of the Caribbean—a process that accelerated around the time of the development of the Grapetree Bay Hotel—by positioning it firmly in the global cultural banal. The album's back cover has a picture of Lopez and the singer, wearing clothes with subtle vertical stripes, after Buren's trademark style, in the compositional equivalent of a wink.

Critics and curators repeatedly describe Torres's practice as research-based, which is a problem. When curator Elizabeth Thomas writes in her description of *Je ne sais. . .* that "Mario García Torres has spent years researching these murals, piecing together the facts from the biography of de Saint Phalle and from Buren monographs, and traveling to the abandoned site to experience and document the murals firsthand and trace anecdotal information about the hotel's troubled history,"² perhaps what she should have said is that Torres "performed research over a period of years." The difference is slight, but significant. Spending years researching implies a rigour that I'm sure not even Torres would argue is present in his work, while researching over a period of years fits more with his type of quiet and persistent interest. Of course, the suggestion of an intensive research practice provides the work with a greater weight and is therefore appealing to a market looking for an intellectual return alongside the monetary, especially within a project that foregrounds its anxiety over academic art-historical discourse. But maybe "investigative" or "explorational" should replace

“research-based” in reference to Torres’s work. Torres likely did a lot of reading and writing and contacted anyone he could who might have information about the histories that interest him. The *Some Reference Material* referred to in the title of the Matrix exhibition is a small vitrine containing the Pedrito Altieri album and a cocktail stir stick, plate, and room service slip from the hotel. As evidence of research, however, they contribute very little to the project beyond a confirmation of proximity, if not to the hotel itself—the photographs do that—then to somebody who had a relationship close enough to the resort to hold on to its physical remnants.

The pieces risk becoming accounts of Torres’s working vacations, performed against the backdrop of Kippenberger and Buren’s working vacations. If Torres means to critique the artist-hero’s disengagement from the more temperate climes they found themselves in by replicating it, I think the tactic fails. His description of the interactions with the people of Syros, who were kind but generally uninterested in MOMAS, make it seem like the island is a space made for the ephemeral and geared toward the itinerant subject. His descriptions of the beaches as “blissfully underdeveloped,” or of the original MOMAS, which was a building which had stood unfinished for approximately twenty-five years, as “located picturesquely on an empty lot,” or even his account of how Kippenberger became intrigued by the site while flying into Syros’s small airport—that infamous *view from above*—are presented without irony or concern. If Torres is unconcerned with the artists’ negotiation of the local, and potentially vice versa, I think he has missed an opportunity. The work becomes a fetishized object for its excavation of past objects to fetishize—non-canonical projects by canonical artists. Galleries and audiences have been and will continue to be receptive, but the work is not necessarily successful as an idea. Torres has previously addressed the anxieties of the colonizing forces of art in *Carta Abierta a Dr. Atl* (*Open Letter to Dr. Atl*) (2005), a short film he showed at the 2007 Venice Biennale. In this piece, in which a fictional letter Torres wrote to the deceased Mexican landscape painter Gerardo Murillo, or Dr. Atl, appears subtitled over footage of a Mexican valley near Guadalajara, he again uses a

sentimental, lyrical tone to imagine the effect of a rumoured construction of a Guggenheim franchise museum at the crest of the valley. A similar self-reflection and concern for the ramifications of art tourism, or artists’ tourism, does not appear in the works he made in other geographies. While an acknowledgment of the local impact of economies of visiting or invasion need not be a requirement for any work produced within a foreign space, the absence of any attempt to understand the space beyond its role as a curious backdrop for overlooked artwork seems to border on the cynical. Positioning it against the contested terrain of art historical research does a disservice to the tradition of social art history. The idea of collapsed or circular time—present in the form of the slide carousels, vinyl record, and the revisitation and, in a sense, remounting of previous work—is not enough to acquit the work from its responsibility to the historical, however tired a concept that might be in contemporary art discourse over the past decade.

I submit that Torres’s work in *Whatever Doesn’t Kill You...* and *Je ne sais...* is not so much research as a challenge to research; the projects of Kippenberger and Buren are likely to reach a wider audience and make a different impression through their display in a narrativized gallery installation than in a critical art journal. But the works are still in need of analysis and development, and future art historical projects will owe a debt to Torres. In that way, both pieces function poetically, as I think Torres assumes they do, but as a heuristic. In that way, their deficiencies—the laissez-faire approach to language and images, and the neglect of all social characteristics embedded within the history of the pieces—are even more productive than their achievements.

About the Author

Jamie Hilder is a Vancouver-based artist and critic whose work addresses issues surrounding performance, urbanism, and economics.

Cf. Mario García Torres: *Je ne sais si c'en est la cause, What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger, and Some Reference Materials*, Berkeley Art Museum, February 22 to May 17, 2009.

Notes begin on page 115.

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at the Berkeley Art Museum

1. Chris Fitzpatrick, "Some Reference Material: Mario García Torres in Conversation," *Art in America*, <http://artinamericamagazine.com/features/mario-garcia-torres-bampfa>.
2. Elizabeth Thomas, "Je ne sais si c'en est la cause, What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger, and Some Reference Material," exhibition pamphlet essay, Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, 2009, n. pag.

David Berridge
The Storyteller of Negative Space

1. Susan Hiller, *The Provisional Texture of Reality*, ed. Alexandra M. Kokoli (Zurich: JRP Ringer and Dijon: Less Presses du réel, 2008), 81.
2. *Ibid.*, 33.
3. Thanks to Kristina Lee Podesva for suggesting this term.
4. Both journals are print-based, but see <http://themock.co.uk> and <http://materialpress.org> for further information.
5. Hiller, *The Provisional Texture of Reality*, 46.
6. *Ibid.*, 55.
7. *Ibid.*, 246.
8. *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). Einzig's volume is a useful resource for thinking through new taxonomies of Hiller's artistic production in which her writings figure. This is evident through the book's transcriptions of slide presentations, such as "The Dream and the Word" and "The Word and the Dream" (both 1993), which can be usefully compared to other artists' use of slide, overhead projector, and PowerPoint sequences in art works (Robert Smithson through Janet Cardiff/George Bures Miller to Leckey, Will Holder, and Alexandre Singh would be a useful though hugely partial starting point on this topic). Possibilities for these new taxonomies also emerge in *Thinking About Art* through the ample illustration of Hiller's talks and essays with writing—including art works.
9. Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie* (2007) resulted from research in archives of extinct and endangered languages. The soundtrack of the "film" comprised a sequence of archival recordings, whilst white subtitles at the foot of the always

black screen offered English translations or noted when no translation was available. A further text in the top left corner identified the language in block capitals and noted its status, for example, "(severely endangered)." For its exhibition at London's Matt's Gallery in July 2008, the gallery was turned into a miniature cinema, with rows of seats and visitors allowed in only at the commencement of each twenty-minute screening. The work was shown alongside twenty-four etchings, each derived from oscilloscope traces of a voice on the soundtrack.

10. *Ibid.*, 115.
11. *Ibid.*, 117.
12. *Ibid.*, 249.

Milena Tomic
An Impossible Map

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, trans. François Raffoul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 50. See also Raffoul's introduction to Nancy's text.
2. Gregg Perkins, "Josiah McElheny," *Art Forum* (2006), <http://artforum.com/archive/id=12036>.
3. Here, I am thinking of theosophist thought as it was mined by key modernist figures such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, and Joseph Beuys, as well as the importance of Zen Buddhism for John Cage, Marina Abramović, and others.

Renato Rodrigues da Silva
Interdisciplinarity and Participation
in Contemporary Brazilian Art

1. See Ferreira Gullar, "Neoconcrete Manifesto," *Jornal do Brasil*, March 22, 1959. An English translation of this document was published under the title "1959: Neo-concretist Manifesto," *October* 69 (Summer 1994), 91–95.
2. The contribution of Neoconcretism to contemporary art shows that critical discourses based on traditional divisions between centre and periphery, metropolis and hinterland, first and third worlds are no longer valid. Thus, this contribution should be addressed by a new theoretical approach to the problem of culture, one that is proposed in postcolonial studies.
3. In this article, the term "constructivism" means the general trend of geometric abstractionism that was born

in Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century and spread throughout the world, reaching Latin America in the late 1940s. In Brazil, this international trend was represented by Max Bill's Concretism, which was characterized by an extreme concern about the formal elements of the artwork. On Brazilian constructivism, see Aracy Amaral, *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte, 1950–1962*, exh. cat. (Rio de Janeiro/ São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna of Rio de Janeiro/Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 1977).

4. Then, the critic wrote the essay "On the Affective Nature of the Work of Art," which became extremely important for Brazilian abstractionism. On this article, see Mário Pedrosa, *Arte/ Forma e Personalidade* (São Paulo: Editora Kairós, 1979).
5. Lygia Clark, *Lygia Clark*, exh. cat. (Barcelona/ Marseille/ Porto/ Brussels/ Rio de Janeiro: Antoni Tàpies Foundation/ MAC Contemporary Galleries/ Serralves Foundation/ Palais de Beaux Arts Society/ Paço Imperial: 1997), 72.

6. *Ibid.*, 140.
7. *Ibid.*, 121.
8. Lygia Clark, "Nostalgia of the Body," *October*, no. 69 (Summer 1994), 99. The full instructions are as follows: *Make yourself a Trailing: you take the band of paper wrapped around a book, you cut it open, you twist it, and you glue it back together so as to produce a Möbius strip. Take a pair of scissors, stick one point into the surface and cut continuously along the length of the strip. Take care not to converge with the preexisting cut—which will cause the band to separate into two pieces. When you have gone the circuit of the strip, it's up to you whether to cut to the left or to the right of the cut you've already made. The idea of choice is capital. The unique meaning of this experience is in the act of doing it. The work is your act alone. To the extent that you cut the strip, it refines and redoubles itself into interlacings. At the end the path is so narrow that you can't open it further. It's the end of the trail.*
9. *Ibid.*, 99.
10. *Ibid.*, 99.
11. *Ibid.*, 100.
12. Waldemar Cordeiro, "Teoria e Prática do Concretismo Carioca," Amaral, *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte, 1950–1962*, 134.
13. Ferreira Gullar, "Lygia Clark: A Radical Experience (1954–1958)," *The Neoconcrete Experiment—A Watershed in Art* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify Edições,