

Between Times/Between Worlds

Multimedia Works by Silvia A. Malagrino

The Perspective Series
John Michael Kohler Arts Center

An image is that in which the past and the
now flash into a constellation

Walter Benjamin (1)

Silvia Malagrino both engages and expands Benjamin's idea of the image as a confluence of past and present, pointing to meaning not only located within the frame of the image but also in the space between images where the viewer is positioned. In her multimedia installation **Between Times/Between Worlds** created specifically for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and including videos and mural-size photographs, Malagrino superimposes visual and audio layers "to construct a complex field of experience referencing history, cultural anthropology, geography, theater, photography and film."⁽²⁾ **Between Times/Between Worlds** combines personal and political histories to create an intricate weaving of associations and relationships.

Malagrino began photographing in her native country, Argentina, as a gesture of resistance. She was studying literature and modern languages at Buenos Aires University when the school was shut down following the military coup d'état in 1976.⁽³⁾ In 1978, Malagrino moved to the United States. In her early work, she navigated between the memory of her native Argentinian culture and her gradual assimilation into the social fabric of her adopted culture. About her place on the periphery of culture, Malagrino reflected: "From my position of marginalized subject (woman/exile/immigrant alien) I dealt with the realm of memory and dreams."⁽⁴⁾ Curator Inverna Lockpez argues that "Culture and personality are inextricable bound, and the immigrant experience is difficult terrain--physically distant from what is familiar, psychologically distant from what is near."⁽⁵⁾ However, this difficult place on the margin also provides a unique multicultural perspective suspicious of strict binary oppositions between place and placelessness, between fixed center and periphery or margin, and, most of all, between master narrative and diverse, equally valid knowledges.

Sound bytes from the videos audible in both the exterior and interior spaces of **Between Times/Between Worlds** together with the photographs refer to the complex political past and present of Latin America whose written history begins with the plunder of natural resources, as we learn in the video *Hotel America*. The video was shot at Guatavita, a crater lake in the Andes which was the sacred ritual place of the pre-Columbian Muisca Indians as well as the setting of the myth of El Dorado. The clash between traditional indigenous beliefs and the pursuit of wealth, the high level of violence over natural resources, and the politics of globalization in Colombia make it a particularly good example of the broader political developments since the European conquest of the Americas. In the fifteenth century, unimaginable fortunes in gold and silver were shipped to Spain from harbors in Central and South America at the cost of thousands of lives. At the end of the twentieth century, privatization of Latin America has

become widespread as national wealth is sold to foreign companies. Today, images and stories of greed are broadcast nightly as the news focuses on the violence surrounding the Colombian drug wars. Latin American history is thus shaped by colonialism and civil conflicts that have repeatedly recast its borders. The resulting territorializations, annexations, and forced migrations have characterized the histories and ancestries of Latinos in the Americas. These aspects of Latin American culture produced particular attitudes toward history, politics, spirituality, and the land.

This politicizing spirituality also engenders Malagrino's installation **Between Times/Between Worlds** representing her attitude that "one's interior world is not separate from one's social existence."⁽⁶⁾ Malagrino has described her art-making process as an intuitive experience in which deeper connections are made on the unconscious and subconscious levels which result in images which have fresh symbolic relationships and offer expanded meanings."⁽⁷⁾ These symbolic relationships are encouraged by the mise-en-scene of her installation, using theater lights to highlight certain pieces. The highlights function to fix points of time in the installation, plunging other parts into dreamlike associative matter. Malagrino thus stages her own subjective constructions of images in which dreams and memories are essential to the process of articulation of her ideas. In this way, she invites the viewer to participate in the process of articulation.

In the triptych *Field of Vision*, enhanced with gold toner, a television still taken during the Gulf War of a finger pointing to a map is superimposed with a technical diagram of photographic vision. Malagrino comments on the process by which images are generated by computers and photographic apparatus to create the kind of hyper-reality witnessed in the television broadcasts during the Gulf War. With the two lighted diptychs, *Fission Track* and *To Make a Quipu*, she draws attention to how different peoples from different cultures have attempted to organize and quantify reality. *Fission Track* refers to geological investigations to determine the age of rocks contrasted with an image of a tortoise shell used as an oracle by the ancient Chinese. Indigenous Latin American peoples used quipus as a system of codifying information in which the knots of the strings tied to a main cord served as statistical records. The image of the quipu is juxtaposed with a highly pixilated reproduction of a typical tourist photograph from Latin America. Malagrino brings together images that at first seem incongruent but end up revealing common systems that govern the perception of reality.

Between Times/Between Worlds thus involves the viewer in a process of mediation between cultures, histories, and spiritualities. It is a space that negotiates between past and present, distant and close, outside and inside, margin and center, foreign and familiar, natural and political. Malagrino's photographs are combinations of highly sophisticated digital imaging and manual manipulations of the negatives. She uses appropriated images from television as well as photographs from her own collection. Malagrino comments: "I construct negatives derived from all visual sources, altering them with paint and other materials such as sand, wax, fire, and water."⁽⁸⁾ For instance, the murals in the series *Habitat* include sections of landscapes, archaeological artifacts, and abstracted images of the body, land and water. Malagrino states, "The blending of textures, the abstract and figurative elements of the photographs propose multiple, cross-referential readings between skin, fabrics, technology, organic and inorganic matter."⁽⁹⁾ Simply pinned to the wall, the murals evoke ancient hieroglyphic markings and political

posters eroded by time. The smaller photographs such as *Field of Vision* and *Crop* have a metallic finish and are put behind glass to heighten the surface reflections, thereby engaging the viewer in the creation of meaning. This active reading of the images suggest possibilities for interpretation, a proposal of ideas rather than a didactic approach to the work. However, the shiny surfaces of the photographs also reflect the significant role of precious metals in Latin America's colonial history. The lines in the field of the photograph *Crop* can also be interpreted as lines of cocaine, the most precious contemporary Colombian resource representing a new form of colonialism. The issue of the hazardous nature of these precious metals first sought after the conquerors and here used by Malagrino to enhance the surfaces of her photographs is again picked up in the video *Cargo/Ship of Fools*. In this short video, a tanker passes endlessly on ocean waters as a superimposed clock ticks away. The cargo of the barge is hazardous waste material from industrialized countries that poor Third World countries will accept for the right price, representing yet another form of contemporary colonialism. The ticking clock is a reminder of the impending doom of environmental suicide.

Time is another recurring theme in *Between Times/Between Worlds* as a surveillance camera tapes the digital clock on the Firststar Bank across the street from the gallery. The image of the clock projected on a TV monitor in the middle of the installation. Originally public clocks were used to measure production. In this way, the industrial landscape of profit is brought into the gallery, and local industry is implicated in the destruction of natural resources and the environment. However, by making these references to experiential time, Malagrino also reminds the spectators of their complicity in the abuse of the natural environment.

While her videos and photographs make references to specific events and times, Malagrino is not interested in merely recording those events but, rather, in the connection between them, creating a web of associations across the gallery between photographs and videos. *Hotel America* consists of two synchronized tapes laid out like an open book, offering multiple visual and audio layers of Colombian culture. In this same way, the highly textured murals of the series *Habitat* and *Vestiges* are characterized by montaged images where only fragments of the human body are detectable under layers of cultural, political, and historical debris. The disappearance of the human body in Malagrino's photographs directly refers to the "disappeared" in her native Argentina and conjures the widely broadcast images of mothers marching on the square of Buenos Aires holding up photographs of their missing children.

The layering of information that marks Malagrino's installation on all these different levels eschews a simplistic view of suppression and dispossession of one group (indigenous peoples) by another (Europeans). Malagrino attempts to avoid such monolithic conceptions by offering multiple readings of her work. In 1992, she made this statement in response to the quincentennial of the European conquest of the Americas.

At the end of the millennium, it is becoming clear that there is an urgency to recover from the consciousness of domination. No man, no woman, from any race, class, age, or sexual orientation is innocent. How many times do we act as the torturer, the murderer, the suppressor of each other and the environment? The social question is also an individual question. The conqueror is with us and is within. So is the liberator. It is a matter of choice.(10)

At the end of her video *Hotel America*, Malagrino suggests that one way to recover from the environmental and oppressive madness that characterizes contemporary societies is to return to the ancient spirit of the sea, a feminine principle that encompasses past and future, thought and memory. Malagrino's installation **Between Times/Between Worlds** combines this belief in ancient mythology with a sophisticated understanding of political, historical, and representational systems.

Andrea Inselmann
Associate Curator

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations* (Fontana: London, 1973) as quoted in Artist Statement by Malagrino, no date.
2. Ibid.
3. Military dictatorships had ruled Argentina intermittently since 1966, most recently from 1976 to 1983. A constitutional government took power from the military regime following the Falklands wars.
4. Malagrino, op. cit.
5. Inverna Lockpez in *Engaged Cultures-Ten Contemporary Latino Artists*, organized by Gallery Association of New York State, with Intar Latin American Gallery, exhibition brochure, 1993.
6. Malagrino, in "Toward a Synthetic Art Education", by Sheila Pinkel, *Framework*, Vol. 1, no. 2, 1987.
7. Ibid.
8. Silvia A. Malagrino, in "Photography: Three artists see the world with distinct inner views," by Abigail Foerstner, *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 1992.
9. Ibid.
10. Malagrino, in "500 years: Artists Respond to the Quincentennial", *Chicago Artists News*, October, 1992.