

# One-direction gaps

## Notes on the origins of video art in Uruguay and Slovenia (Fragment)

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### Introduction

There is a growing interest in comparing art histories from Eastern Europe and South America in the field of visual arts, especially concerning the period from about 1960 to 1989. There are three factors that justify this concern. The first one is the direct relationship between the two regions, partly created by the different waves of migration in both directions and their historical processes, and partly by cultural exchange, linked to them or not. The second one is the confirmation and analysis of certain points in common between South America and Eastern Europe in the field of artistic creation since the 1960s<sup>1</sup>. The third factor is the "*contemporaneity*" (PREDA, 2015: 56) of "dictatorial regimes" in several countries from both regions in the 1970s and 1980s, a context in which "*strategies for dealing with all kinds of political measures of repression were simultaneously being cultivated*" (DRESSLER, 2010)<sup>2</sup>.

We face a set of problems, however, when discussing the Yugoslav case in relation to the third factor in the list, given its peculiar political, economic and social characteristics. This circumstance leads to some authors to distinguish between "*the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia and South America*", for example (DE BAERE, 2012: 2), while Caterina Preda's work in this field of comparative analysis often puts apart Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia because of the relative openness and tolerance of the socialist governments of these two countries towards critical artistic practices (PREDA, 2013: 12).

This text deals with some aspects of the origins of video art in Uruguay and Slovenia, two countries which have, despite their enormous differences, certain similarities<sup>3</sup>. It will provide a couple of examples of the difficulties arising from these stimulating exercises in comparative art histories. It will also put into question that other common place of supposing the countries of South America in general and those of Eastern Europe in general as operating in equivalent "margins" of the hegemonic centres of artistic production and historicalisation.

### The emergence of video art in Slovenia and Uruguay

There are huge differences between Uruguay and Slovenia in terms of literature, archives and research projects dealing with video art and its history. Although the other countries of the Southern Cone<sup>4</sup> have important antecedents in research and archive projects, Uruguay suffers from a lack of similar initiatives, while the first exhibition accompanied by a critical catalogue that dealt

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<sup>1</sup> This is the core of the exhibitions *Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s / South America / Europe* (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2010), *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* (MoMA, New York, 2015–2016) and *Témpano. El problema de lo institucional. Cruces entre Europa del Este y el Río de la Plata* (Museum of Contemporary Art of Montevideo/National Museum for the Visual Arts, Montevideo, July–August 2017).

<sup>2</sup> A fourth factor is the necessity of rebuilding the lost bridges once connecting macropolitical emancipatory projects and artistic production from both regions.

<sup>3</sup> Among them, the number of inhabitants and their position between big or powerful neighbours, an aspect that probably contributes to configure some characteristics of the national characters. Also a high degree of cultural centralization in their respective capital cities and a high level of literacy and access to tertiary education (at least during the twentieth century).

<sup>4</sup> The term "Southern Cone" traditionally refers to the territories of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, countries which share a series of historical, social and economic coordinates.

exhaustively and specifically with the history of Uruguayan video art was carried out in 2007<sup>5</sup>, although it had a precursor in a "Laboratory" produced the previous year<sup>6</sup>. As for Slovenia, as early as 1999 there is at least one important publication of historical-critical analysis (*Videodokument, Video Art in Slovenia 1969-1998*), a project accompanied by exhibitions in the institutional framework of what will be called SCCA-Ljubljana, Center for Contemporary Art<sup>7</sup> from 2000 onwards. While there is no exhaustive Uruguayan video archives available to the general public until now, this Slovenian institution has developed a complete and active archive of Slovene and Yugoslav video art production, DIVA, also available, for the most part, for online viewing. This imbalance between the Slovenian and Uruguayan panoramas can also be noticed in the pedagogical, critical and academic fields, while the experimental video production made in the framework of public television was in Slovenia (even before 1969, date of the first Slovenian video art piece, see: ZAJC, 1999) a possibility that no Uruguayan artist could aspire to during the dictatorial period (1973-1985).

On the other hand, it is possible to risk the hypothesis that video art production was more quickly institutionalized in Uruguay than in Slovenia. Already in August of 1988 - only five years after what is considered the first Uruguayan work of video art – the exhibition *Video art in Uruguay* was made at the National Museum of Visual Arts (MNAV, Montevideo). It was a benchmark in the process of symbiotic relation between a nucleus of local video artists and the main museum institution in the country. This relationship included the production and exhibition of works over many years, thanks to the support of MNAV's then director, Angel Kalenberg. One of the pioneers of video art in Uruguay, Enrique Aguerre, is today the director of the MNAV, and the first Uruguayan video artist, Fernando Álvarez Cozzi, works in the same institution in the Video Department. In spite of this landscape, the critic Nelson Di Maggio wrote in 2001 that "*these artists were formed in the absence of teachers and with difficulties for exhibiting*" (PELUFFO LINARI, 2014: 55). This certainly controversial theme is important because it also points out to the minefield, and thus still under-studied subject, of the political histories of art under dictatorship, and their persistence and consequences today<sup>8</sup>. All these considerations also refer to the construction of the canon and what was left behind in the process: underground culture, peripheral contexts and women's production, experimental cinema, the work of Uruguayan artists working outside of the country, and so on.

The greatest evidence of the big difference between the Uruguayan and Slovene contexts, however, is the dating of the first works of video art made by local artists (with equipment, of course, produced abroad). "*The history of video art in Slovenia begins with Belo mleko belih prsi*

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<sup>5</sup>*La condición video. 25 años de videoarte en el Uruguay*. Centro Cultural de España, Montevideo, 2007. The main historical text produced by Enrique Aguerre, curator of the exhibition, is the same (with some additions) that forms the section dedicated to Uruguay in the book *Video en Latinoamérica. Una historia crítica* (AECID, 2008). It can be considered, at this point, an hegemonic account.

<sup>6</sup>05982: 01 (July 2006) was organized by the Contemporary Art Foundation of Montevideo (FAC), with the curatorship of Ángela López Ruiz. It included a cycle of talks, screenings and public activities linked to an archive in process.

<sup>7</sup>See: <http://www.scca-ljubljana.si/>

<sup>8</sup>One of the cases that illustrates this point and becomes significant in the context of this research, is the Uruguayan shipment, curated by Ángel Kalenberg, to the Latin American Section of the X Paris Biennial (1980), which included Álvarez Cozzi (who was not yet a video artist). It produced a strong rejection in some sectors of the community of Latin American artists. The attempt to boycott the Biennial, initiated by Felipe Ehrenberg in Mexico, seems to have been decisive in the decision of the Uruguayan de facto government to arrest and imprison the artist Clemente Padín, also a participant and co-organizer of the protest. Álvarez Cozzi and Clemente Padín will participate together in numerous Uruguayan video art exhibitions from 1985 onwards. See: "Record: Biennial X. The documented history of a failed plot," by Grupo Proceso Pentágono (Documents | Intellectual Networks in Latin America, Item # 90, <http://redesintelectuales.net/documentos/items/show/90>).

*[White milk of white breasts]*, made in 1969 by Nuša and Srečo Dragan. Slovenia was then present at the very beginnings of this kind of creation in the world." (DRAGAN, 2014a: 32). In Uruguay, meanwhile, the first piece of video art, *Voy por el camino* [I'm on the way], from the Grupo Teatro Danza de Montevideo [Theater-Dance Group of Montevideo], was produced in 1982. This circumstance, given the contemporary activity performed in the field by Argentine and Chilean artists<sup>9</sup>, clearly speaks of the extreme isolation of the Uruguayan culture in the 1970s<sup>10</sup>.

If we consider the three basic models of actuation of video art pioneers, as illustrated, for example, in the documentary TV-show *Video: The New Wave*<sup>11</sup> (1973), the one which emphasizes the possibilities of the medium to create alternative models to television, linked to activism and documentary film, is the one which less exponents presented during the foundational period of video art, in Slovenia as well as in Uruguay. The other two models, focused on experimentation with the specificities of the medium itself and its use as a tool for registering and communicating processes (connected to performance, artist's studios and the tradition of portrait and self-portrait), were dominant. In that sense, the inaugural piece of the history of Uruguayan video art is quite atypical (although symptomatic), especially in the general context of the production of its main responsible *as video*, Fernando Álvarez Cozzi. *I'm on the way* (1982, 16 minutes) is essentially the registry of a choreography (by Julia Gadé) for two contemporary dancers (Julia Gadé and José Claudio) in various urban settings. Apart from the edition, made through "inserts in the own camera" (AGUERRE, 2007: 17), this piece of filmed dance does not present formal characteristics or contents that exploit the specificities of the video medium. Music, on the other hand, is present at all times (in off). It consists of a series of musicalizations created by Maorik Techeira about texts in verse written by children of a rural area of western-southern Uruguay in the decade of 1930. This soundtrack is, from a stylistic point of view, traditional and folkloric. From the formal point of view it is constructed as a series of independent songs with instrumental and recited sections. From the point of view of its contents, is naïf and loosely lyrical/optimistic/vitalist ("*The hands squeeze the flower of life/ and in their cavity they keep the light to see the stars*"; "*I'm on the way/ I go wherever he takes me/ lowering my voice*"). This aspect greatly restricts the possible interest of the dancers' actions (it is an interesting exercise to watch the video without sound). In addition to the presentation strategies of the work (title screens and credits reminiscent of cinematographic models) and the strategies used to produce an "end" (following of the dancers' movements in a park, camera in hand/ central composition of straight bodies, without contact, performing mixed/open figures; one of the dancers points toward the sky with an arm/ camera moves up and frames the tree tops/ fade to black), give the whole a very strange combination of naivety and self-complacency. The obvious absence of irony, on the other hand, does not justify an allegorising reading of messages or intentions of any kind that the artists have attempted to convey in subtle ways, given the conditions of censorship and self-censorship prevailing in the local context.

However, Álvarez Cozzi, "*disappointed by the low quality of the image and the roughness of the video equipment, begins to experiment with the semi-controlled technique of feedback*" (AGUERRE, 2007: 18), thus beginning a long period of experimentation with material itself and its

<sup>9</sup> The origins of video art in Argentina and Chile are usually dated in 1966 and 1974, respectively. These dates are, of course, conventions.

<sup>10</sup> Institutions like CAYC [Center for Art and Communication] in Buenos Aires kept internationally disseminating the work of contemporary Argentine artists (including video artists) even during the dictatorial period (1975-1990).

<sup>11</sup> *Video: The New Wave*. 58'27", B&W, sound. Produced by WGBH, directed by Fred Barzyk, narrated by Brian O'Doherty.

relation to sound (*Variations in Spiral*, 1983; *Anticlips*, 1985, over music by Meredith Monk). The results achieved by these works are much more sophisticated, and at the same time we can easily associate them with similar works made by pioneers of video art from the global art centres. Other key representatives of this initial stage of video art in Uruguay began to produce, from 1984 on, other types of works, especially interesting when connected with the fields of poetry and performance (Roberto Mascaró, Verónica Artagaveytia, Clemente Padín, Eduardo Acosta Bentos). The latter two produced video works which presented sometimes latent or explicit contents of criticism and denunciation of the practices of torture and *disappearance* of the regime's enemies (leftists, activists, intellectuals, artists) carried out by the dictatorship, as in the case of Padín's *For Art and for Peace*, 1984. This last model of actuation, linked to the representation of institutional violence in one's own body, has no parallels in Slovenian video art production, in which the explicit criticism of the regime is centred on the parodic manipulation of symbols, speeches and images of the power. On the contrary, the importance of sexuality, pornography and eroticism in Slovenian video art since its beginnings has no correlate in Uruguay. The relationship of video art production with rock and punk music, which in Slovenia had a superlative importance in the process of (auto) representation of the "alternative scene" of the 80s, it is in Uruguay a lateral aspect, or at least so it seems in view of the official histories of video art produced until now (and maybe this perspective must be revised).

Nuša and Srečo Dragan, creators of the first works of video art in Slovenia, came from the field of conceptualism, which "gave priority to the communicational, immaterial and non-figurative aspect" and frequently used "ascetic conceptual videograms" (KOVIČ, 1999: 35). For this couple of artists, according to another author,

...art is an alternative language, a form of communication, whose outward manifestation is the creative process. This process is totally non-material and is realized only in the medium of the idea: what is shown on the videotapes, the photographs or the films they produce is, in their opinion, only an impulse for the spectator's mind. (BREJC, 1978: 19)

Meanwhile, Barbara Borčič adds that "For them, video constituted an element of artistic action and at the same time it was used as a documentation tool. It was mainly understood as a means of immediate interactive communication with the audience." (BORČIČ, 1999: 11).

The first piece of video art produced in Slovenia, *White Milk of White Breasts* (1969, reconstructed in 1994<sup>12</sup>), justifies these observations absolutely. It is a "static image that is projected on the screen while a discussion takes place between the participants of the action: the image changes in the perception of the participants as they themselves participate in the filmed action" (KOVIČ, 1999: 31). This static image comes from a film (*Beli ljudje*, by Naško Križnar, 1970) and shows a syringe pouring a drop of milk over the teat of a woman's bare breast. The "changes" in the image are given by the overlapping of graphic signs such as diagrams that refer to the participants in "simultaneous group communication" (DRAGAN, 2014b: 3) and their different roles in the semiotic process, as well as short texts describing this process itself. The sound is made up of a collage of voices in different languages expressing short sentences about video art itself

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<sup>12</sup> The vicissitudes of the material existence of this work make it a typical case of pioneering video art piece traversed by diverse and sometimes contradictory stories about, for example, its original duration and the technology used to produce it.

("musique de chambre de notre époque", "video art starts tomorrow..."). "The work concludes with a diagram of the "results" of the video, the dialogue itself." (DRAGAN, 2014b: 3)13.

The affiliation of this work with the contemporary experimental cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, the semiotic and structuralist theories, and recent trends in Conceptual Art is evident. Its (perhaps masturbatory) *aggiornamento*, for the other hand, sharply contrasts with the lack of comparable references accessible to those Uruguayan artists who began working on video art more than a decade later. This observation could be illustrated with the case of Alvarez Cozzi himself, who, apart from integrating (since 1974) the Grupo Danza Teatro de Montevideo, was active, from 1978-1979 on, at the artists' informal association Octaedro, one of the main responsables for the renewal of the artistic scene (in the midst of dictatorship) through the appropriation of strategies and methods of Conceptual Art. It is interesting to note, thanks to the study on the case carried out by the Uruguayan researcher May Puchet, the importance that Alvarez Cozzi and some of his fellow members gave to a copy of *Idea as Art. Documents on Conceptual Art* by Gregory Battcock, a lonely conceptual book circulating among them which was a determining influence at a time when "Uruguay was quite isolated from what was happening in the world" (PUCHET, 2014: 92). It is important to say, by the way, that Nuša and Srečo Dragan were also part of a group of artists, OHO, which performed in the Slovenian context a definitive appropriation of conceptualism, and it is in the context of this association of artists that the couple's first experiments with video arises. In Uruguay, the "re-readings of Conceptual Art" made during the dictatorship had a different profile, partly because they were marked by a context of censorship and self-censorship much more pronounced and partly due to the proverbial conservatism of the Uruguayan art scene, against which these artists rebelled while, on the other hand, exemplifying. Thus, the "immateriality" pursued by the artists of OHO was indeed very resisted by the artists of Octaedro, Los Otros or Axioma, for example. Video, as it could be imagined, was not a privileged tool in the practice of the art groups that represent in Uruguay the pioneering "conceptualist line".

### **Video art in the "opening"**

It is interesting to notice that both socio-political contexts, Slovenian and Uruguayan, are usually analysed in terms of "openness" at the time when the artistic practices we have analysed came to happen:

The Yugoslav policy of opening up to other countries in the 1960s generated a series of international exhibitions. [...] Young Yugoslav artists were aware of the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s and 1970s in the West, and identified with conceptual art, current in that time, in one aspect especially: that of confronting the conservative artistic institutions that supported the academic hierarchy of the art world and its classic forms of expression. As they questioned everything, they discovered different and more independent channels. (BORČIČ, 2003: 493)

The identification with Conceptual Art (or at least the need to understand and assimilate it), the confrontation with conservative artistic institutions and the search for alternative channels were characteristic of the artists and groups of artists who began to work during the dictatorial period in Uruguay in the early 1980s too. The "openness" that began to be clearly envisaged in Uruguay towards 1983 was directed not only towards "other countries", but (most clearly) to the end of the dictatorship, which for the majority of the people was (and there were not too many real options)

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<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to add that *I'm on the way* was released in a movie theatre in 1983, while the Dragans' work was exhibited in a circuit of galleries and alternative cultural centres.

equal to the return of the multi-party, parliamentary, democratic system from "before". In any case, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the communist party at the federal and national levels left the countries that were part of it in a similar position in many respects to the one the Southern Cone countries acceded at the end of the dictatorial periods, and almost contemporaneously. This unique direction of both "opening" processes led to economic neoliberalism, the insertion in the global market and the homogenization of the political system following the model of hegemonic Western democracies, and in both South America and Eastern Europe, meant the political and social defeat of any alternative project and perspective divergent of the great global teleological narrative of capitalism.

The issues of "openness to what" and the (self) criticism of the role that intellectuals and artists played in the process of "transition", relatively common in the cultural milieu of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, is unparalleled in Uruguay. There, it would be difficult to imagine a "radical self-criticism" such as that of Bogdan Lešnik in his analysis of the role of video and video artists in the "alternative culture" of Ljubljana in the 1980s. This alternative culture, states Lešnik, *"thought itself as a sort of minimalist revolution"*, but it was in fact *"not a revolution, but the end of the revolution, its dissolution"*. In this rare essay, devoted to the analysis of the failure of the expectations placed on video art as an "object" and as a "tool of documentation" for the Slovenian alternative culture (as exemplified in a frustrated alternative TV project), Lešnik goes on to say that *"somehow still relied on the system it subverted, it is not surprise that, in effect, [the alternative culture] contributed not only to the elimination of the former system but also to the elimination of itself [...] as a relevant political position which, for a time, it actually was."* (LEŠNIK, 1999: 51) And even more:

Today, it is quite possible to say that the alternative scene in this country was merely the concrete form of a "counterrevolution" that was taking place [...] on a much larger scale and certainly determined that scene; and if the idea is pushed to the edge: the [alternative] scene has come to existence precisely for its execution [of that counter-revolution] (or at least for a softer transition). (LEŠNIK, 1999: 52)

This extraordinary, angry, sincere and undoubtedly exaggerated (in a philosophical sense<sup>14</sup>) text leads us back to the initial question of the studies that consider the "dictatorial regimes" of Yugoslavia and the countries of the Southern Cone to be "comparable". Lešnik's catharsis is unthinkable in the Uruguayan context, not because it is not possible, but because it would not be plausible. No member of the groups and individuals that were part of the "alternative culture" in dictatorship would consider themselves as acting a reactionary role through the practices, gestures, behaviours and actions considered then as evidences of cultural "openness".

This dialogue, which is somewhat uneasy and obscure, points out to the construction of a black hole in the attention paid in Uruguay to the internal processes which, in the histories of art as well as in any field of culture and society, communicate the pre-dictatorial period, the military dictatorship and the post-dictatorship times. This absence or void has led to a clear depoliticization of history, theory and praxis of art, to a worrying shortage of institutional criticism and to the acceptance of the best of possible worlds after a cultural catastrophe considered to be finished, but instead still operating in the present in numerous fields and at different levels. The practice of video art, due to the conditions of its emergence, its dependence on technological development, its

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<sup>14</sup> See: Alexander García-Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration* (Continuum, 2007).

frequent links with other arts and its almost typological models of actuation, is a very appropriate object of study to perceive and analyse this state of things.

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