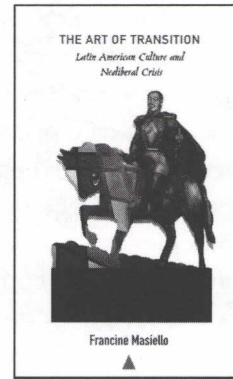


The Art of Transition, Duke University Press, 2001, 334 pages.



FRANCINE MASIELLO *THE ART OF TRANSITION*

Chrissy Arce, Luís Ramos
University of California, Berkeley

Francine Masiello's bold new book, *The Art of Transition* (Duke University Press), explores the radical possibilities of literature and art for contemporary Latin America. By taking Chile and Argentina as case examples, Masiello poses with courage and conviction difficult questions about the fate of cultural production in the neoliberal era, in particular, but also more general ones about the gap between experience and representation. She begins by inquiring about the link between collective memory and the market. As she herself puts it, "Who is allowed to recall the past? Can the meditations of art ever respect the memory of horror? And conversely, should one impose restraints on projects of the avant-garde art?" (6). Interestingly, by locating gender as a dominant trope in the work of recent Latin American writers and artists, Masiello finds in the aesthetic the possibility of imagining and reshaping future alternatives to our present condition. As she states, "[m]y plan is to present the conditions for a reflection on alliance through critical thinking, to argue the ways in which art and literature do not cultivate the (gendered) margin simply for effects of scandal, but instead take these representations to reconsider our contemporary crisis, thereby leading one to the workings of a social whole" (13). Hence it is by continuously exploring gender difference and marginality in their work, Masiello argues, that contemporary Latin American writers advance an aesthetic project that resists both the silencing impulses of postdictatorial regimes and the homogenizing logic of the market. In so doing, Masiello made a much needed critical move in current scholarly debates in the humanities by putting the politics back into art, and conversely, by putting the art back into politics. Indeed, Masiello makes us wonder if thinking of the aesthetic and the political as mutually exclusive categories might not be a ruse of the Manichean desire of neoliberalism itself.

In part one of this critical triptych of the contemporary Latin American cultural terrain (the book is organized into three sections: "Masks", "Maps" and "Markets"), Masiello gives about the most thorough and incisive assessment of current intellectual debates of region around. By charting the critical projects of diverse figures such as Beatriz Sarlo, Nelly Richard, Nestor García Canclini, and figures that may be less known in the U.S.—yet no less influential in Latin America—such as Raquel Olea, Tomas Abraham and Bernardo Subercaseaux, Masiello demonstrates how Latin American intellectuals

share with their artistic compatriots a preoccupation with gender as a way to “articulate an overarching concern for the fate of the political field”(38). Gender, then, allows critics as diverse as Beatriz Sarlo and Nestor Perlongher not only to critically examine the politics of difference, but also to imagine its alternative possibilities. Perhaps not surprisingly, gender becomes a privileged trope because “[t]he gendered body is the prime metaphor of difference and likeness: it serves the debate about the self and other and tracks the tension between elites and subalterns; it articulates the tension between North and South, between one’s native language and its translation; it sustains a tension between genealogy and difference, between permanence and disorder....” (41). Moreover, by combining deft textual criticism and keen historical analysis, Masiello demonstrates how the performance art, poetry and novels of queer Latin American artists/activists rely on the aesthetic as a means of resisting the historical amnesia of democracy and the commodification of difference by the market.

In part two (“Maps”), Masiello initially deals with the tensions that often emerge between scholars from the North and their objects of study from the South. By turning a skeptical eye towards some of the well-intentioned projects of North American scholars committed to Latin America, she strategically urges us to ask ourselves: “How are we as cultural brokers to manage North/South relations?” (117). She then examines how authors such as Isabel Allende and Julia Alvarez, in spite of their best-selling status and mass-cultural appeal nonetheless manage to contest U.S.-based market hegemony “by drawing attention to women’s participatory role in bridging the North/South divide” (133). She concludes the chapter by turning to the fiction of Diamela Eltit, and in a critical tour de force, demonstrates how Eltit’s text simultaneously pushes the literary mode to its limits and critiques the Latin American family ideal. Eltit’s text successfully provides a critical account of Argentine culture under dictatorship while experimenting with literary form, Masiello convincingly argues, because it relies on a gendered aesthetic that remains on the margins of both political and literary modes of representation. Finally, in the last chapter, she demonstrates how gendered tropes in current Latin American literary texts can be situated in an expanded understanding of the concept of translation, that is, one that takes into account the ways in which literary texts participate in the flow of global capital. Thus she examines how writers like Eltit partake in—and ultimately upset—the steady and continuous flow of meaning dictated by the market on a global scale. As Masiello puts it, such writers “upset conceptual maps of North and South, East and West, modernist and postmodernist assessments of knowledge” and “bring into view the power of a gendered field to alter the politics of geography and the illusion of a global wholeness” (173).

Masiello introduces both chapters of the third part of her book (“Markets”) with multimedia artwork by Chilean artists who explore the relationship between politics and representation, but more importantly, invite the observer to “complete the historical continuum with knowledge from our previous experience, filling all temporal and spatial gaps with supplements drawn from our imagination and an inherited critical language” (180). In other words, the fragmented imagery that the artists create oblige the observer to fill in the narrative, to draw from his/her own experience to complete the story, and constitute him/herself as an active agent of resistance to the “master” story. By implicating the observer, the various experiences that will juxtapose and graft themselves onto the original image resuscitate, and even beckon, the recognition of individual memory. To this end she states, “this suturing allows the artist to patch random textual forms on

historical experience and memory" (219). This is a very appropriate introduction to the following chapters, which provide an engaging discussion of the ways in which the politics of the text resist the homogenizing and seemingly omnipotent forces of the market. In chapter five, she specifically engages the works of Ricardo Piglia and Diamela Eltit, and their reappropriation of "lo popular" as agents of change and movement, rather than nostalgia and neat resolution. In both Piglia and Eltit's work, Masiello suggests that their popular subjects "remind us of the gap between experience and language, the dislocated idioms that beg for reintegration in local history" (219). In short, memory can be recuperated, re-articulated, through the presence of these popular subjects. Eltit uses the poor, the abandoned, and the abject to "command the power of the aesthetic; they transform the rules of language" (207). This redirection provides the artistic alternative to memory while the marketplace, or plaza, provides the physical space for the rendering of these stories. As compared to the abstraction of a neoliberal market, the immediacy and tangibility of the traditional Latin American marketplace and its popular figures, "expose the market for its fiction" (207). It is from this space, this difference, that her characters reveal their memories, creating a pastiche that evades the totalizing efforts of the market. Nevertheless, Masiello deftly illustrates that the moment the market recognizes this "difference", it voraciously seeks it out for its own consumption, hence completing the inevitable cycle of commodification.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the rather fashionable trend towards morbid theoretical predictions, Masiello offers us in her final chapter an optimistic and valiant vindication of the power of poetry and its project of not only bridging the gap between language and experience, but of creating a new language with which to speak of memory, one that seeks "a common space for dialogue outside of the neoliberal divide" (18). Herein lies the title of the book: it is in this "art of transition" that we can expect to find the bridge between language and experience. Poetry is reclaimed as the medium through which critical thinking can be newly articulated outside of the neoliberal paradigm. By virtue of its inventive manipulation of the language, its circuitry, and non-linear form, poetry can become the powerful medium by which marginal poets will help manage the delicate transition from post-dictatorial societies. Although Masiello somewhat overwhelms us by engaging the works of at least a dozen Chilean and Argentine poets, she takes on their texts fluidly, offering brilliant insights and skillful translations. One is left with an indelible flavor of the richness and originality of these poets, as well as the impulse to continue exploring their texts.

Agile because it skillfully weaves together diverse genres, figures, and concerns, rich insofar as it successfully incorporates various facets of Latin American culture, *The Art of Transition* is itself an aesthetic performance that charts our own transition between the political and the poetic, between individual memory and collective resolution, and between present realities and future possibilities. In sum, Masiello convincingly demonstrates that the aesthetic is not only a worthy site of resistance, but also a necessary one.

