



**PONCE DE LEÓN, JENNIFER. *ANOTHER AESTHETICS IS POSSIBLE: ARTS OF REBELLION IN THE FOURTH WORLD WAR*. DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, APRIL 2021, 328 PP.**

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Immersed in an era of global trade blocs and rapid neoliberal expansion, profound socioeconomic, political and cultural transformations have taken place in Latin America over the last three decades. The expansion of global trade facilitated the flow of products across borders, with some devastating consequences for workers and small-scale producers as we see, for instance, in Mexico with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 (Gálvez, 2018). Neoliberal reforms led to a reduction of social programs, high unemployment rates and cycles of hyperinflation. Argentina implemented the Convertibility Plan in the 1990s, in an attempt to control hyperinflation by overvaluing its currency to be interchangeable with the U.S. dollar. The plan collapsed in 2001, leaving millions without their life-long savings, homeless and/or unemployed. Against this backdrop of sociopolitical crises is an era of authoritarian military regimes, going up to 1990 across Latin American countries, that responded to ideological opposition with systematic repression (Rodríguez, 2021). During this time the public space was reorganized and resignified. Torture, murder, and disappearance took place in designated detention centers and, at times, in public view. The return to democratically elected governments brought about hope for justice against the perpetrators of state crimes, which was curtailed by amnesty processes. The expansion of neoliberalism exacerbated the tensions between the state and public demand for accountability, not only for the military, but also for the democratic governments. We see this clearly during the 2001 financial collapse in Argentina. In response, a new

wave of anti-systemic and counterhegemonic social movements emerged, unwilling to renegotiate a fragile inclusion into the national agenda. These social actors worked to reorganize the geographic spaces, leading to new social relations and practices (Zibechi, 2012). Amidst these changes, we see the emergence of activist art movements set on exposing ongoing abuses to human rights. Current visible state-led histories are intertwined with invisible ethnic pasts that date back to the colonial period in the Americas. Similarly, visible violence is intertwined with processes of invisible violence, the product of hegemonic erasures. A common denominator in past and present social struggles is the demand for more equitable wealth redistribution, which this book addresses, specifically from the vantage point of art activism, with a focus on artists in Mexico, Los Angeles and Argentina.

Jennifer Ponce de León's *Another Aesthetics is Possible* describes how Latin American artists confront a global capitalist offensive by engaging the public with unique and often surreal productions. Ponce de León is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. She utilizes her American Studies and Art History background to connect social movements in México, Los Angeles, and Argentina to the global struggle against neo-colonialism, aesthetics of history, and hegemonic state apparatuses. Her primary intent is to show that another world is not only possible but currently exists within social movements and can be made apparent through specific forms of art praxis.

Ponce de León grounds rebel art in the theoretical foundations of Gramsci and Brecht, among others. These theories offer the potential for revealing the aesthetics of a new social order through various art productions. By elucidating the mass media's intentionally nebulous view of these artists the author's work becomes significant. Ponce de León shows that mass media is used to hide or disrupt these artists' work from the social struggles against hegemonic structures.

The author's methodology explores artistic intent and interconnected productions with artist interviews between the late 1990s and 2013. She used professional and personal networks to engage with the artists even participating herself in events such as *escraches* (a form of public shaming that exposes perpetrators). The author conducts transdisciplinary research with data that connects local, national, and transnational contexts.

Ponce de León starts by providing a complex theoretical structure in the introduction. Her theoretical framework is based upon Marx's social theory with connections to Gramsci's "armor of coercion," upon which the hegemonic state relies. In addition, Gramsci's theory of hegemony is

connected to Bertolt Brecht's political argument for art, views on socialist art, and the participatory concept of the spect(actor) in theatrical productions. The author frames these concepts with Galeano's theory of the looking glass and Marx's camera obscura to show how the hegemonic state purposefully flips reality to position ideology within a controllable realm. Finally, Ponce de León utilizes this comprehensive theoretical framework to support her argument that another world is not only possible but already exists.

In chapter one the author discusses hegemonic art in contrast to activist art by looking at two key cases. One is the attempted reclamation by Mexico of the Penacho de Moctezuma (an Aztec headdress) held within the Vienna World Museum in Austria. In the second case the author also discusses the responses by the Fran Illich-led Diego de la Vega Cooperative Media Conglomerate and their alternative reality game *Raiders of the Lost Crown* (2013). Illich draws inspiration from Zapatismo to manipulate globalization, participatory democracy, and to ridicule neo-colonialism. Ponce de León's discussion on state power connects to museums' hegemonic function, while clearly demonstrating the use-value of art and historical artifacts. Chapter two takes us to Los Angeles, where the focus is on Sandra de la Loza's art and her research-based, open-ended frameworks at Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History's countermonuments from 2002-2007 (de la Loza, 2021).<sup>1</sup> The concepts of aesthetics of history and space are further explored in these countermonuments which are wall plaques that commemorate erased ethnic history. Ponce de León contrasts state produced history, which often excludes more than includes cultural diversity, with indigenous histories. Her incorporation of concepts by Poulantzas, Rockhill, and Trouillot situate the current use of historical markers and the cultural eraser known as gentrification in the grander hegemonic function of history.

Chapters three and four focus on the Argentine artists Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC), Etcetera..., and Internacional Errorista in two eras linked by the 2001 financial crises. Chapter three discusses the aforementioned art groups from their formation up to 2001 and chapter four discusses the groups from 2001 to 2005. Ponce de León's discussion of the aesthetics of history is rolled into the Argentine fight for expanded human rights discourse and the grassroots movement to condemn oppressors living without consequence in Argentina. She links Brecht, Boal, and Gramsci's conception of art and theater to protests and art production through this discussion. In particular, the focus is on the *escrache*. Within the art of the GAC and Etcetera... we see the interpretation of Brecht's argument that "socialist art should be for (the people)" where both

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<sup>1</sup> The center is now referred to as the Pochx Research Society of Erased and Invisible History.

groups guide the audience through signage, maps, and demonstrations helping direct or publicize escraches in public spaces (p. 21). From there, Ponce de León explains the context and power of the 2001 popular uprisings. This positions the discussion of the theater of politics, Gramsci's armor of coercion, and the use of global "wars" (on drugs and terror) to enact a police state while further dividing the classes. The last section of chapter four is dedicated to the work of the Errorista's against the Free Trade Area of the Americas and the Argentine security state; one can see murmurs of NAFTA and the constant neo-liberalization of world economies. By reviewing and dissecting productions by GAC, Etcetera..., and Internacional Errorista post-2001, Ponce de León shows how interconnected and emergent each issue is to Argentina and the world.

In the conclusion Ponce de León highlights the broader concepts of cultural production and *other* aesthetics. She shows how the activist artists are creating an alternative world of art and politics to present actualized social relations. These relations are typically presented through a looking glass (camera obscura) by the hegemonic structures of the state and mass media. The artists accentuate how the world-making process deployed by the state seeks to ensure that only its hegemonic view of reality is seen. Throughout the work are black and white, as well as sixteen color images from each artistic production.

While the introduction is theoretically robust, the conclusion is comparatively weak. The book's central premise is that the change needed to build new and more equitable societies is not only possible; it already exists within the framework of a counterhegemonic aesthetics, "even if fragile and under siege" (p. 250). This leads to the first of our three main areas of critique. Regarding the specific analysis of art practices, portions of chapters three and four show how the state hegemonic practices are used to absorb or weaken these new social movements, leaving a question mark for their ability to project and grow their *other* aesthetics. Art's ability to highlight and protect the fragile *other world* is being slowly wrestled away from the popular classes to provide a sanitized hegemonic structure. Ponce de León presents a glimmer of hope amidst unresolved adversity. Further discussion is needed about countering these state tactics to ensure the autonomous praxis of these movements. As the book progresses, we expect the possibility of another world to become stronger, instead we see it diminished.

The second critique relates to the timeline of analysis from the late 1990s to 2013 yet the book was published in 2021 without updates regarding the artists' trajectories between the end of her data collection and the book's publication. The author leaves readers uncertain about the feasibility of her claims. A global dimension to activist art and digital media appears to be

growing, where GAC interacts (Artivism, 2019), that is disregarded by Ponce de Leon. Given the future-oriented purpose and emphasis on transformation in her analysis, this is a missed opportunity for a more current discussion on the possibility of a new aesthetics. The book could have been further strengthened with an expanded reflection on post-hegemonic futures and in-depth interviews with the artists on this point.

Our final critique refers to the lack of substantial consideration of Latin American thought. Despite the author's strong theoretical framework and creative connections to art activism, most of her work rests on hegemonic intellectual productions with limited touches on Latin American scholars, notably Galeano and Zibechi, and a swift mention of Svampa. The overreliance on authors from the global north adheres to academia's hegemonic structure. Thinkers such as José Carlos Mariátegui, who stated that revolutionary art is "the repudiation, the removal, the mockery of the bourgeoisie absolute" (Vanden, 2011), would have complemented her work. This view speaks directly to the artist's tongue-in-cheek demonstrations that target the hegemonic structure. Recent contemporary scholars such Pérez Balbi (2012), reflected on the changing use of the public space in the arts in Argentina. Hernán Lopez Piñeyro (2018), arrived at similar conclusions expanding upon the micro war that is being waged against hegemonic structures in Latin America. For a book set to contribute to the counterhegemonic and anti-neocolonial advances of neoliberalism, it falls short in its pursuit by perpetuating a form of intellectual hegemony.

Despite these critiques the book has significant strengths especially on how hegemony was dissected from the vantage point of art activism drawing connections between local, national and transnational praxes. Overall, the book presents important reflections on current social change through the vantage point of art activism and offers an invitation to continue a needed critical engagement with hegemonic structures around art, hegemonic institutions, and the security state.

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