

A Mexican Anti-Fiesta Full of Uneasy Realities

By HOLLAND COTTER

A few months ago, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center announced a survey of contemporary art from Mexico City as its big summer show. It would include more than two dozen young artists, among them Gabriel Orozco, Damián Ortega and Daniela Rossell, who are already known in New York; in Mr. Orozco's case, well known.

For some reason, plans changed. What's been delivered is a theme show with almost one-third fewer artists. (Mr. Orozco and Mr. Ortega are among the missing.) In principle, less could be more, making a big-picture sweep into something leaner and sharper.

As it turns out, "Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values," while a show of interest, feels far too lean for the space it's been given and so sharp in the case of at least one work as to raise ethical qualms.

Certainly, anyone expecting an upbeat, fiesta atmosphere will be disappointed. As organized by Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator at P.S. 1, the show is an idea-driven and unwilling to please as its title, which automatically puts it at a disadvantage in New York at present.

The current fashion is for tasty, bright, sexy things that demonstrate quantifiable skills. New conceptual art is being dismissed as tired and derivative, while derivative painting — which is much painting now — is O.K. So the conceptual part is the problem. We're back to the well-made Object again, big time.

That's not at all a bad place to be: objects can be wonderful, though there's nothing intrinsically wonderful about objecthood in itself. The real issue may come down to what you want or need art to be. New York, which has museums, collectors and endless money to spend, wants these objects to be solid, refined, a good investment. Much of the rest of the world — where materials are scarce, markets are nonexistent and the threat of social disruption constant — needs art to be portable, politically dynamic and just plain doable day by day.

Such a difference in perspective helps explain, at least a little bit, why issue-oriented third-world-intensive affairs like the current Documenta, as polished and expensive as they may be, can make the Manhattan gallery scene look, by comparison, like Toys "R" Us. It also helps explain the flimsy-heavy character of "Mexico City."

Mr. Biesenbach does some explaining of his own in an exhibition handout. He sees Mexico City as a nightmare of abjection: poor, polluted, violent, death-ridden, a world

of predators and victims where anything can be bought and everyone is dispensable. If his take feels sensationalist, a form of reverse exoticism, it's the picture he stays with, and he shapes it carefully throughout the show.

This is true right from the start. A gallery near the entrance to the show holds a series of gruesome images of car crashes and suicides by Enrique Metinides, a veteran Mexico City police photographer. The exhibition itself begins with aerial shots of the city's most downtrodden neighborhoods. Taken by the artist Melanie Smith, they suggest surveillance photographs of alien terrain.

These images could as easily be of the South Bronx as of Mexico: impoverished urban neighborhoods tend to share a "look." And, indeed, cultural sharing, positive and negative, with global capitalism as the binder, is a theme touched on by many of the show's 17 artists.

Gabriel Kuri digitally alters American-style breakfast cereal boxes to insert news photographs of natural catastrophes and military maneuvers. A music video by Jonathan Hernández, made in collaboration with the design group Torolab and the band Fussible, documents regular nighttime visits by California teenagers to Tijuana, where they get drunk, flash their money and aggressively act out.

In five portrait photographs titled "Think Global — Act Local" by Minerva Cuevas, Mexican men wear crisp Nike and Tommy designer T-shirts. Are the men workers in border factories where these shirts are made? Are they street vendors advertising the knockoff versions they sell on the street? Either interpretation would make sense.

The show spends a lot of time in the street, a tough place to be. Crime is a problem, and Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón have ostensibly done their bit to contribute to it. They've filmed each other breaking into a car to steal a radio and stacked 120 such radios in the gallery as evidence their out-law exploits.

How much of their larcenous behavior is real, however, and how much has been invented as a theatrical comment on the link between economics and violence they leave ambiguous.

Francis Alys, an artist to treasure, is represented by two series of projected slide images: one of peddlers struggling to move their wares through the city, the other of homeless men lying in public places. Eduardo Abaroa and Rubén Ortiz Torres turn street garbage into aesthetic gold: they



Greene Nafali, New York, from P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center



Galeria OMR from P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center

gather chewed corncobs and replicate them as Super-Realist sculptures. And Mr. Abaroa has cooked up a funky portable version of Barnett Newman's grand 1967 "Broken Obelisk" from awning material used in open-air markets. Very tall and very pink, it looks like a battered kite in a nose dive.

There are other shrewdly whimsical entries. In Gustavo Artigas's video "The Rules of the Game," two American basketball teams and two Mexican soccer teams play their different sports in the same space, risking collision but weaving in and out of each other's way with balletic precision. Pedro Reyes has woven a set of beautiful, basketlike seats from colored plastic strips. Suspended from the ceiling, they are meant to protect their occupants from earthquakes.

Certain work that seems benign on the surface has a disquieting underside. Such is the case with Ms. Rossell's series of photographs of rich young Mexican women preening in homes that are monuments to conspicuous consumption. It is also true of Teresa Margolles's "Vaporization." For this installation a gallery is suffused with a ghostly mist produced from water that the artist has used, in a ritual gesture of tenderness and respect, to wash unclaimed corpses in the morgue of a Mexico City hospital where she studied forensic medicine. (The water used in the installation has been disinfected.)

Ms. Margolles is best known for an earlier installation in which she displayed the severed tongue of a teenage Mexican boy killed in a street fight. She got permission from the boy's family to remove and keep the tongue in exchange for paying for his burial. The results shocked and infuriated many people, and so, no doubt, will a piece by Ivan Edeza in "Mexico City."

It's an edited version of a film, reportedly made in Brazil in the 1970's and available on the Mexican black market, of what Mr. Biesenbach describes as wealthy hunters in helicopters tracking down Brazilian Indians in the forest, picking them off with rifles and mutilating their dead bodies. Although Mr. Edeza has blurred the image with a kind of visual static, there is no doubt about what's taking place.

What do you do with such an obscene document, if it is indeed a document? Like the photographs of lynched African Americans exhibited in a New York gallery two years ago, it belongs in a museum of atrocities, not in a group show in an art space. But to direct outrage at the artist — censoring him for telling us things we don't want to know in the only language he has — is misguided. The focus should be on the realities he's revealed: crimes against humanity, and a society, still in place, that permits them.

But what happens if or when this piece,

which is an outtake from a mass snuff film, goes on sale, moves from the black market to the art market, is used to enhance a career, enrich a gallery, burnish a collection as it gains value from notoriety? Apart from the stunning insult to the film's victims, it becomes an operative part of the very system — why do we keep pretending that everything's not connected? — that produced the original film and permitted the murders to take place.

That a similar film of Holocaust killings could be similarly exhibited and marketed is unthinkable. P.S. 1 said that Mr. Edeza, who is not represented by a gallery, owns the piece, which has been exhibited often before in Mexico. What he will do with it and where it will end up I don't know. But its presence in an exhibition stretches the art world's studied position of moral ambivalence to the snapping point. Everybody had better start doing some examining, and right now.

Despite its impact, there's almost nothing to Mr. Edeza's piece, formally speaking, a bit of film and a monitor in an otherwise empty room.

This is true of most of the work in "Mexico City." In his case, "almost nothing" is still too much.

In others, where the ideas are elusive or thin, it feels like not enough, an impression exacerbated both by a stretched-out installation and by the knowledge that some of these artists have appeared to better advantage elsewhere.

Personally, I ended up taking the whole show as a single, multipart conceptual piece; and given its thematic coherence, this seems plausible.

I also ended up thinking about how much more there is going on in contemporary Mexican art — in and out of Mexico City — than what we see here. Which leaves the door open for someone to do another, different, update soon.

Two different Mexicos: left, a portrait from Daniela Rossell's "Ricas y Famosas" ("Rich and Famous"); photography series, and below left, a detail from "Photo for Spiral City 1" an aerial view of Mexico City's slums, by Melanie Smith. Both are in a group show at P.S. 1.

"Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values" remains at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens, through September, (718) 784-2084. It travels to Kunst-Werke Berlin and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Carrillo Gil, Mexico City.