BERTA SICHEL: ***THE BALLGAME***

The moment when Ruth Hardinger began to affirm herself as an artist working in a cross-cultural context coincides with a shift in intellectual thinking in the mid-seventies, when ideas such as "diversity" and "difference", as opposed to "universal consensus" and "total history" took over academia and then echoed in other spheres of life, including art. Claiming the existence of a diverse social and cultural spectrum and denying the validity of unified representation of the world, these changes in the traditional forms of historical analysis provoked an acute campaign in favor of interweaving disciplines. Encouraging dialogue within and across different specialties and allowing discourse between them to come to fruition, the cultural climate of the 70's has created new ways of producing knowledge. This innovation in thinking certainly has provoked an innovation in art, generously enlarging the aesthetics and artistic possibilities of our time.

This new freedom – named postmodernism, multiculturalism or even globalism – inspired Hardinger. Equipped with a background in archaeology and an interest in mythologies and ancient cultures, her work was transformed, emerging with possibilities radically different from her modernist artistic ancestors. Throughout this century many artists have looked to ancient and tribal people, and then translated the "art" of these cultures to serve their own purposes in the advancement of fine art. Particularly Picasso and Braque come to mind, as well as the British sculptor, Henry Moore, whose ***Reclning Figure*** was inspired by the ***Chac Mool*** figures of ancient Mexico. A list of North and South American artists can be added to the long list of European names, and includes prominent figures such as Diego River and Frida Kahlo as well as the only regionally known members of a short-lived school in New York. These artists later connected to the Northwest Coasts Indian art to create an abstract two-dimensional pictorial.[1] The same impulse is also encountered in a group of Brazilian artists and intellectuals, especially in the art of Tarsila do Amaral and in the literature of Mario de Andrade, and in the work of the Uruguayan artist, Joachim Torres Garcia and his followers at the ***Escuela del Sur.*** As Torres Garcia wrote, "the goal was to encounter the real artistic impetus, not in Europe, but in their own land, in order to continue the renovation of their legacy."

Although the distinctions between Hardinger and these modernist European American and South American artists can be addressed through various perspectives, what is relevant here is the time in which she is living and how she acknowledges, understands and incorporates the current cultural tenets in her work. After Modernism's loss of its critical nerve, this new theoretical thinking opened new gates and released new possibilities, associations, and approaches to criticism, history, theory and aesthetics. Multiculturalism not only refers to the acknowledgment and coexistence of many cultures in today's world, but it particularly points to a dialectical situation where globalization and fragmentation coexist. Seen in this way, multiculturalism forces the recognition and the inclusion of "knowledges" previously disqualified as they seemed "naïve knowledge", thus located beneath the required level of "scientificity".

The Ballgame, the title for this exhibition, and the title for the most recent group of works configured here as an installation (Ballgame), comes from the ancient Mesoamerican ritual game played for over two millennia throughout Central America and the Caribbean in many different forms. A poignant title, the game itself "was a central focus of power and mystery", a game of action and motion because it symbolically represents what is necessary to maintain the cyclically recurring movements of life.[2]

Likewise, the movements and actions in a work of art maintain a cycle.[3] In Hardinger's work this cycle takes an interdisciplinary contour and the driving force behind this show, certainly a multicultural project, is its demarcation as an offshoot of an historical process, rather than a mere patchwork of cultural combinations. If decolonization, and the accompanying changes in aesthetic attitudes, is the most important global event at work today, the exhibit permits an encounter and a reconstruction of awareness

regarding supposedly primitive and historical cultures, such as of the Native Americans. Since the process of decolonization means not only the "literal military withdrawal from the colonies" but also the "long aftermath of cultural readjustment in which the world is presently engaged,"[4] ***The Ballgame*** is an arena where these alignments take place.

The results of Hardinger's newly expanded consciousness are revealed in the selection of sculptures and paintings made from 1988 to the present and included in this exhibition. Made in New York City, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, these works not only traverse media and material boundaries, but also cross cultural contexts. Demonstrating Hardinger's progressive trajectory in breaking the lines separating one concept from another – or one culture from another – they also reveal her desire to develop an original system for mixing and harmonizing aesthetic categories, theories and perceptions.

The sculpture, ***Horn,*** resembling a large, ancient shepherd's horn and made of pigmented concrete – unlike traditional sculptural materials such as bronze, marble, or wood – marks the growth of a body of work. A painterly sculpture, it happens to have been made simultaneously with a group of paintings entitled, ***Mounds.*** These just-off-square paintings in acrylic on linen have a plaster mound attached toward, but never-exactly-on center of each canvas. This artifice takes the central image of the canvas and brings it into real space. These works establish an interdisciplinary bridge between sculpture's physicality and painting's illusory qualities.

Continuing a dialogue between media, we find the ***Sirens,*** sculptures, and ***Exponent of the Mound, Tres Tiempos,*** and ***Mayu Land Tract,*** paintings, each, in their own way, investigating new ways to consider art in non-Western terms. Hardinger's ***Sirens,*** using legends as a point of reference, are mounted high on the walls, held in precarious balance on the floor, or piled in stacks, and refer to muses in the Odyssey. "Singing rocks" Hardinger calls them, and again made with lively colored pigmented concrete, they appear to be made quite recently – in opposition to the possibility of being very old.

The fascination with the circle form, as a primary element in Hardinger's work, conveys the power of a ritual form…something to which one constantly returns. In fact, the circle appears throughout her work as a signature form, constantly being recycled. In addition to the symbolic character (i.e:, its reference to concepts of the universe indicated through their numeration), when the circles are stacked they refer to the child-like behavior of piling one object on top of the other to go as high as possible. It is an unrefined, fresh behavior which can allow one to pass through boundaries of tradition habit and socially established norms.

Tres Tiempos, Exponent of the Mound, and ***Mayu Land Tract*** repeat the breast-like protrusions of the earlier "mound paintings" address an element of sexuality, and bring into this arena the female body and the relationship between it and mound/mountain. These works further reference South American indigenous religious beliefs regarding the relationship between natural phenomenon. "Mayu" , is the Quichua name for Milky Way, refers to the Andean tribal concept that the "river of the sky" is the Milky Way.[5] The theme of river, as a substance flowing either on earth or in the heavens is continued in ***Tres Tiempos.*** The title, ***Exponent of the Mound,*** uses a twist on the word "exponent" as it has multiple meanings; to progress, as a mathematical term, and it also means to explain. All the paintings deal with ideas of time and space that are, essentially not from European-based notions. These paintings are worked from both the front side and the back side. Therefore, the painting's surfaces are particularly ambiguous, and the surfaces do not necessarily sit on the front of the canvas. They convey a strong sense of multi-directional motion, which implies time, a concern which brings us back to the sculpture as a ring which turns, rotates, balances and becomes stacked.

Ten new works comprise the installation ***Ballgame.*** It includes ten free-standing sculptures dyed with cochineal, pigmented concrete, and covered with fresco,[6] as well as ceramics and weaving. Each work contains one Aztec rock from Tenochitlan[7] and stands solemnly – or not so solemnly – around a central wall-work, a "tapete". These pieces were created during the spring and summer of 1992 in Oaxaca, Mexico where Hardinger has been living on a Fulbright Fellowship, in a reality disparate from her New York routine and values. As an artist, a woman, and an Anglo, Hardinger is learning, experiencing and participating in non-Western cultures of indigenous American people to fully come to terms with a new understanding of the multicultural characteristics of contemporary society as well as her own artistic identity.

Making an analogy to the ancient Mesoamerican belief that life was maintained through the shedding of blood in war and sacrifice, the installation moves between death and rebirth, incorporating contemporary tribal art and ancient symbols, along with Hardinger's own signature forms. This work destructs prevailing aesthetic conventions while proposing ideas for their immediate reconstruction. Exhibited here for the first time, these new works also comprise a novel repertoire of images, symbols and concepts, including materials and techniques that have been hidden and/or rejected for many years. They delve much deeper into her earlier ambition of mixing and crossing materials and cultures.

Seen within this framework, the ***Ballgame,*** including the group of new works, as well as the installation, contains the seed of an original system for mixing and harmonizing aesthetic categories and theoretical innovations. Instead of concealing an influence – or causing a transformation that negates the identity of the source-the work on the artisans – the symbols of the ancient civilizations are maintained, and all involvement is credited.

Hardinger commissioned these artisans to produce what they produce and to create it specifically for this context:

Eufrocina Vásquez has made the bands of delicately-woven cotton cloth, interwoven with purple and yellow animals and geometric designs. This style of weaving is Chontal from the small village in Oaxaca's isthmus, San Bartolo Yautepéc. It is a rare style made exclusively in this village. The technology of weaving with a back-strap loom is used widely throughout Oaxaca, with various regional techniques and patterns distinguishing one tribal motif from another. This tradition in San Bartolo has been used certainly for ages, yet the small village lost the knowledge of this particular technique. Today, only a very small number of women continue to make the intricate designs of this tradition.

Enerina Enríquez López made the orange-ware circle forms in ceramic with the assistance of her niece and nephew, Isabel Martínez Maldonado and Guillermo Enríquez Cháves. In the village of Atzompa, situated in the shadow of the large mountain on which the ceremonial plaza of the ancient Zapotec civilization was built, almost the entire population of the village continues the ceramic tradition of their pre-Columbian ancestors. Vessels are hand-built and fired in open cylindrical kilns of mud brick capped with "wasters", that is, layers of broken ceramic. The ceramic rings for the Ballgame bring forward combinations of ancient techniques and contemporary design inventions.

Alberto Vásquez, a Zapotec of the Central Valley, lives and works in Teotitlán del Valle, which, like Atzompa, is a village dedicated to the production of an ancient artisan tradition – in the case of this village – the upright weaving loom. The upright loom was introduced after the Conquest, yet has come to be acquired by the Zapotec people as a traditional implement. It has been used to make sarapes and tapetes for a few centuries ever since. Using the ancient techniques for dying with cochineal and indigo, the tapete Sr. Vásquez made is based on a drawing by Hardinger, which in turn is based on symbols for the Codices Nuttal

(Mixtec) and the Codices Borgia (Aztec). The central feature of the tapete is a Mixtec ballgame patio, a "tlapoyahua" the Aztec symbol for sunset and sunrise, and at the lower portion of the tapete, a place symbol. Paths rise up from the place glyph (symbol) on which are marching feet.

Noé Martínez Cháves is a stone mason from Etla, Oaxaca, who works in canter, a soft stone which comes in green, pink, or striped yellow. In his factory, he has cut and carved the canter rings used in the Ballgame. The rocks are quarried from a mountain which contains a very large vein of stone, and supports the production of this village of masons. Cantera is used widely in the city of Oaxaca today, for fountains, building facades, to pave streets, and in contemporary sculptures. After the Conquest, the Dominican friars ordered its usage for the large cathedrals. It seems to have been used by the Mixtec cultures in Mitla, although earliest evidence for its usage in the Oaxaca Central Valley comes from Olmec at 1200-850 BC.[8]

Hardinger's employing the artisans' work detaches her from the concept of the powerful originating author. Today the "author" or creator is more accurately understood as the one able to intersect various discourses and produce new ones. In these ways, the installation ha the immediate and intended effect of changing prevalent ideas and legacies of colonial domination and the pot-colonial dependency of native art and cultures on a Eurocentric-dominant aesthetic.

In addition, this collaboration makes it possible for a person from one culture to understand "the other". Accessing alternately the past and the present, and by understanding that history does not necessarily occur in a linear sequence, Hardinger has created a series of paths. She goes into the past – not to depict or reproduce the past, but to enrich the present. Since "the foreign-ness" of the past undercuts the legitimacy of the present, these cross-temporal and cross-cultural exchanges between the past and present, between ancient and contemporary, are an imperative condition to understanding our time. Placing one culture inside the other, including one culture in the other, building one culture into the other, ***The Ballgame*** denies the existence of a "unitary body of theory or history".[9] Instead of one culture conquering the other or destroying the other, various identities are maintained and exalted. There is not series of art-world hierarchies: the art of indigenous people, poplar art is equated and included along with the fine art of the dominant culture. And, if there is a portion of impurity involved in the crossing of boundaries between cultures, and the combinations which arise from these maneuvers, one may be reminded that "perhaps, now it is only the impure which might claim any kind of authenticity."[10]

[1] See catalog of the exhibition at Baruch College in New York, Indian Space Painters: Native Sources for American Abstract Art, included works by Robert Barrell, Bertrude Barrer, Peter Busa, Howard Daum, Helen de Mott and Ruth Lewin, in addition to other artists. Although never exhibited at Newf's Gallery where those works were first displayed, Jackson Pollock is connected to the "Indian Space" idea.

[2] The ballgame in Mesoamerica was probably not a spectator sport. It was probably played by elite groups and associated with religious and political activities. In the State of Oaxaca, there were over 300 courts alone in the Central Valley during pre-Columbian times. (Enrique Fernández, archaeologist at Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historía. Conversation with artist, May 1992) As distinguished from the Mayan ball courts which were rectangular and had a ring mounted high on the tall, flat walls, in Oaxaca, the courts are I-shaped, have sloping walls, and no ring. Some Oaxaqueñan courts have corner niches, but the function of these is still unknown. The "Pelota Mixteca" which as is currently played by Sr. Alberto Vásquez, is probably a contemporary variation on the ancient game, in which now a rubber ball is bounced off a stone slab and hit with an elaborate glove. See Marcus Winter, "Oaxaca, the Archaeological Record." Editorial Miutiae Mexicana. S.A.de C.V., 1990, pg 46-47.

[3] Schele, Linda and Freidel, David A. The Mesoamerican Ballgame, Ed. Vernon Scarborough and David Wilcox. 1991, Tucson, AZ, University of Arizona Press. p 197 ff.

[4] McEvilley, Thomas. "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute," Artforum, November 191, pg 86.

[5] Icanchu's Drum, Sullivan, Lawrence E., MacMillan Publishing Co., NY, 1998, pg 343.

[6] Cochineal is an insect which lives as a parasite on the nopal cactus. Thousands of these tiny cocoons are harvested, dried in the sun, and finally crushed to make a rich, dark carmine red. It was probably used extensively throughout Zapotec and Mixtec Oaxaca before the Conquest, although it is difficult to determine the extent to which it was used and when it was developed as no pre-Columbian textiles have survived the climate of the region. Legend has it that then the Aztec warrior died, his body went to live in the nopal cactus. Thus, when the "grana" of cochineal is used, on is, in effect, using the blood of the Aztec warrior. For a long time during the colonial period of Oaxaca, the province was wealthy due to the industry of cochineal. With the invention of aniline dyes, the industry was abandoned in the 1800's. Leopoldo Tapia and Santiago Rosales Ramon, two Oaxaqueñan artists, have been involved in the resurrecting interest and usage of this material both in its traditional modes as a textile dye and in the innovative usage of it as an artist's material.

[7] Information Regarding Aztec Rocks for the Sculptures

Currently excavations under the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City are being done in 16 ft deep wells in order to encounter different building stages in the pre-Hispanic structures. These stages conform to systems of building in which the buildings had cores filled with clay and the stone tezontle. Tezontle is of volcanic origin, and was used by the Aztecs 150 years before the Conquest of the City of Mexico, Tenochitlán.

In well #6, at a depth of 6 meters, we fund this kind of wall of stone primarily Tezontle, also including basalt and granite, which during the Aztec time was part of the interior of a pyramid constructed between 1400 and 1500 AD.

These stones were taken to be used in the sculpture of Ruth Hardinger, and thus they are charged with symbols:

1. Because they are of volcanic origin, they carry a symbol for registered, geological eruptions which have occurred during 2,000 years of the story of Mexico.
2. Because they are from a determined epoch, the Aztecs transported them in canoes across the lake in order to use them as fill for their construction.
3. Because they formed part of a building, they were in effect part of the large sacred enclosure.
4. Because the Aztec related themselves to the center of the earth, as such these rocks were established inside their cosmovision. They were found some 50 meters west of the Templo Mayor, in proximity to where the Aztec played the ballgame.

For the archaeologists, the rocks "speak" of their space and time, as these stones were not worked, they are usually discarded. Yet, they take on a new use, as bearers of symbolism in the sculpture of Ruth Hardinger.

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Proyecto Templo Mayor

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Translated from Spanish by R. Hardinger

Fresco, known as hot lime (cal viva) was used in ancient frescos across Mesoamerica, and the world for that matter. After researching the traditions of ancient builders and the more modern masters, such as the muralist Diego Rivera, Hardinger slaked hot lime for months, and then applied it, mixed with sand to create the "fresco bueno" for parts of the works in the Ballgame.

[8] Ibid, Marcus Winters, pg 30-31.

[9] The French philosopher Michael Foucault uses the term "Genealogy" to refer to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today. Genealogy focuses on local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate "knowledges" - as such of the artisans" against the claims of a unitary body of theory (or history) which filters and which is placed in hierarchies. See Foucault: A critical Reader. 1986, Oxford, Basil, Blackwell and Surup Mada, op p 67.

[10] Ferguson, Russell. "Invisible Center". Out there: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture, 1990, The MIT Press. Cambridge, Mass. Pg 13.