

Book review

Argentinians on the Moon, or Hope for our Tomorrow

Edited by Sarah J. Montross

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The strength and the weakness of *Past Futures: Science Fiction, Space Travel, and Postwar Art of the Americas* (Montross, 2015) lie both in its hybrid character, embodied by robust essays on Pan-American fine arts exploring science fiction topics in the second half of the 1900s, from Outer Space to Utopia. First and foremost, the book is the catalog of a modern art retrospective curated by its editor, Sarah J. Montross, at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine, with essays by Montross herself, and by contributors Rodrigo Alfonso, Miguel Angel Fernandez Delgado, and Rory O'Dea. As such, this title might have remained unrecorded in this journal and its reviews might have been featured in fine arts magazines. However, the co-publisher is MIT Press, with Roger Conover as executive editor. Hence, the book benefitted from the transfer of scientific charisma from MIT Press to all its titles. It might be seen as an unusual coincidence, however, from the specific viewpoint of this *Journal of Tourism Futures*, a lucky one in more than one aspect.

Past Futures: Science Fiction, Space Travel, and Postwar Art of the Americas has several merits on its own. Being the author of this review the former editor of an Italian national magazine in the fine arts sector, it is possible to mention that the artists covered and the artworks presented offer an enjoyable overview of Latin American visual culture in the 1960s. Even further, the introduction of contemporary projects, like the unusual hybrid auto-railway travel vehicle SEFT by Ivan Puig and Andres Padilla Domene (pp. 28-9) stretches the particular relevance of the book to today's fine arts in the wider sense of the domain. Also, the presentation of specific projects by artists of international stature like Robert Smithson offers the

opportunity to uncover less than obvious moments of his artistic journey, like his "anti-expedition" in the Yucatan region of Mexico, unplanned for the purpose of enacting a peculiar "travel at random" anti-positivist research strategy (O'Dea, in: Montross, 2015, p.108). Smithson a leading figure in international contemporary art, as documented by the likes of Ann Reynolds (2003), also published by MIT Press. Even more triggering, there is the possibility to uncover the intimate relationship that Smithson entertained with the visionary novels of J.G. Ballard (O'Dea, in: Montross, 2015, p. 109). Referring to the 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" by art critic and curator Clement Greenberg, O'Dea identifies science fiction as Smithson's "mainline into modernism's unconscious, desires, and secret logics" (p. 109). The status of science fiction, otherwise documented as lower art or minor literature, emerges from this detail of Smithson's intellectual biography in its role of narrative conduit between high and low aesthetic and narrative expressions in modern and contemporary culture. And, in a sort of ideal parallel, the artists edited in this catalog might be described as "affiliated to the utopia" (Fernandez Delgado, in: Montross, 2015, p. 58), as science fiction writers are, according to a reference to the proposal for a sociology of knowledge by Karl Mannheim (Fernandez Delgado, in: Montross, 2015, note 41, p. 60).

Whereas the idea of utopia as emerged again after the 2008 crisis in New Left circles (Jameson, 2005, p. xii), it must be noted as a potential paradox that in the Cold War years this notion was associated with Stalinism, "designating a program which neglected human frailty [...] and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects" (Jameson, 2005, p. xi). The latter definition would perhaps better fit with the contemporary notion of dystopia, however, from the pages of *Past Future* what seems to emerge is the optimism and hope of a decade, the 1960s, that did believe in a better

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future, as based on the Modernist worldview of “progress.” What truly matters is that both “utopia” and “science fiction” are first and foremost narrative genres of fictional narrative, where through the decades, the latter has expanded into a “hyperdiegesis” of transmedia world-building, across media, with participating audiences deferring narrative closure (Hassler-Forest, 2016, pp. 3-5). “Past Futures” might, therefore, be repositioned from modern art catalog to social sciences investigating the notion of the future, as it was articulated in a recent, however, distant past. From this viewpoint, it might be appropriate to mention the postmodernist effort to move beyond the positivist notion of scientific reporting to a palette of reporting formats informed by humanities, in what could be described as the “Literary” or “Poetic” turn in social sciences (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013, p. 3). A new galaxy of expressive potential might then open up for social scientists. Here, it is possible to establish a connection with the notion of social sciences as an agency of “world-making,” from “mirroring to making” (Gergen, 2014, p. 294), where “action research tools and methods might be misused for unethical purposes, like any tool might be abused, or any definition of ‘common good’ or ‘welfare’ might be ambiguous, as any constructed concept” (Bevolo and Gerrits, 2018, p. 39). Just like at the dawn of space exploration, the possibilities might feel endless.

Is there any direct or functional utility between this book and scholars or consultants who work in tourism futures? The answer to this question would objectively be negative because the text is structured according to the semiotic requirements of art critics and the imagery presents artworks that belong to the history of fine arts, not its future. However, this book might offer a number of important opportunities to reflect. First, one might appreciate the cultural bridges built in the past by Latin American artists toward the Western avant-garde, while maintaining an aesthetic and ideological autonomy. This might help to better understand the background of Argentina or Chile or Mexico as present and future tourist destinations, at a level of nation branding. Second, and most importantly, for all of us, the stories of artists, writers, curators, critics and intellectuals who dreamt of a bright future are very telling,

because they feel close to the zeitgeist of these years of fake news and populist politics. In the midst of economic unrest and on the verge of military dictatorship, there were Argentinians who dreamt of reaching the moon while reverberating the socio-political climate of increasing darkness. They created their art for the world reaching the Venice Biennale, and beyond, and they produced their books and movies in dialog with masters like Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. Looking at the current decade, this might feel somehow contemporary, and inspire a visionary ability, in futures research scholars and foresight practitioners, who engage in what Ton van Gool, Director of the STRP Biennale, thinking of the nature of the next science fiction to come, defined as “critical optimism.”

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