

# Between the Graphic and Tectonic: Architecture, Mapping and Topography in Rimer Cardillo's Works

Viktoria Villanyi

Walking along the Excelsior Concourse of the State University of New York at New Paltz, during the Summer of 2004, visitors could witness the installation of a prodigious mix of architecture and printmaking, designed by contemporary artist Rimer Cardillo (Figure 1). Entitled *Environment and Culture: From the Amazon to the Hudson River Valley*, Cardillo's mural was permanently installed on the façade of the Humanities Building. The assortment of silkscreen plants, animals, and archeological objects that occupy the mural's matte porcelain surface seem to have been mapped to the walls from the printed pages of a lexicon or a travel journal (Figure 2). The images are also detached from their original context by the white geometric fields that are superimposed over the pastel background, and a geometric grid that is formed by the pattern of the tile-work (Figure 3).

This paper will discuss the roles of architecture and printmaking in the formation of meaning in Cardillo's mural, suggesting that the two media in Cardillo's work play a conceptual as well as aesthetic role. Employing architecture and the print as tropes of political, economic and cultural dominance, Cardillo uses his installation as a double discourse that functions both as a critique of colonial classificatory methods, and as a commentary on globalization.

The mural's seven motifs have been described by art critics as images of Latin American culture, primarily because of the context in which they appeared in Cardillo's earlier works.<sup>1</sup> There has been only a cursory mention of how the composition of the mural and the architectural structure of the building alters the function and the meaning of these images.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this paper discusses how Cardillo appropriates the images' original meaning through reproductive printmaking. The second part will explain how Cardillo layers meaning through the integration of the mural's design in its architectural environment, the university campus. The third section compares Cardillo's use of printmaking and architec-

ture to the universal constructivist method of Joaquín Torres-García, a muralist and formative figure in the cultural politics of modern Uruguay.<sup>3</sup> This paper suggests that in contrast to Torres-García, who *replaced* the old Colonial definitions of South American culture, with his *alternative* aesthetic terminology, Cardillo rejects the definition of identity and representative practice overall. Going beyond Torres' new pan-Latin American visual register, Cardillo's works locate and describe—rather than define—cultural identity, and create a discourse on transnational experience.

Born in 1944 in Montevideo and living in the United States since 1980, Cardillo has exhibited and taught art in several European and Latin-American countries.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s, he studied printmaking at the art academy of Montevideo, and in Berlin and Leipzig in the German Democratic Republic. Cardillo started to combine printmaking with spatial concepts in installation art during a period of political tension and turmoil in Uruguay. In 1980 he left for New York, together with a group of fellow artists and intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> The New Paltz mural is Cardillo's first large-scale public commission. It condenses thematic groups, iconography and architectural concepts that the artist developed over decades.<sup>6</sup>

As the title of the mural, *Environment and Culture: From the Amazon to the Hudson River Valley* suggests, Cardillo's aim is to create a visual dialogue between the geographic and cultural landscapes of the Americas. Although the title refers to the Amazon River, among the mural's vegetation and wildlife, only the giant turtle originates from Brazil. Even though the tree (of the species *el paraíso*) and the cardinals originate from Uruguay, they have no visual identifiers, and they can be taken for local species pertaining to the Hudson River valley. As Cardillo explains, the archeological photographs and the burial mound<sup>7</sup> originate from the Uruguayan site of *La Quebrada de los Cuervos*, and the image of the Aztec goddess, Tlazolteotl is associated primarily with Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karl Willers, *Impressions and Other Images of Memory* (New Paltz: Samuel Dorsky Museum, 2004) 25-29 and Marysol Nieves, ed. *Araucaria*, (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1998) 9-21.

<sup>2</sup> See Willers' museum guide to *Impressions and Other Images of Memory*, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The relation between Cardillo's art and Joaquín Torres García's constructivism is briefly noted by Ángel Kalenberg in *Cupi degli Ucelli: XLIX Biennale di Venezia* (Germany: Cantz, 2001) 16.

<sup>4</sup> Willers 53-55.

<sup>5</sup> Luis Camnitzer, critic and artist (New York), Cristina Peri Rossi, writer (Barcelona, Spain) et al.

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Cardillo, Gardiner, June, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> For an extended description of the burial mound (*cupi*) in South American indigenous ritual, see Nieves 19-21.

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Cardillo, Gardiner, December, 2004.

Cardillo's goal in bringing these motifs together is to create an imaginary landscape where the two rivers serve as parts of a conceptual framework rather than as accurate geographic parameters.

When designing the mural, Cardillo incorporated the architectural structures of the courtyard, corner and staircase as symbolic sites of passage and change, creating a zone of extension and transition between the campus and the mural (Figure 4). The mural is located just above a steep staircase whose zigzags are mirrored in the wall's bold stepped pyramid patterns. Moreover, Cardillo folds the plane of the mural over the corner of the Humanities Building. Cardillo's notion of the corner as a space of transition is eminent in his earlier silkscreen installation at the Bronx Museum of the Arts where multiples of a silkscreen photo of Tlazolteotl were affixed to the atrium's corner. The composition within the mural's picture plane is dominated by diagonals. The figures are scattered and lack a single compositional center. In addition, the geometric grid operates as a screen that creates a liminal zone between the viewer and the silkscreen images, at the same time enticing and barring the viewer's direct observation. The mural's circular courtyard is designed by Cardillo. It consists of two semicircles and two adjacent centers. The two centers and the semicircles extend the mural's allegory of migration and change.

In his theory on liminality, anthropologist Victor Turner connects asymmetric structures of fragmented and decentralized compositions to the cultural rites of transformation.<sup>9</sup> As Turner explains

the passage from one social [or cultural] status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another. This may take the form of a mere opening of doors, or the literal crossing of a threshold that separates two distinct areas, one associated with the subject's pre-ritual or preliminary status, and the other with his post-ritual and post-liminal status.<sup>10</sup>

It is only through an *absence of center* and presence of a *plural or fragmentary* structure, that the transition between the initial and post-liminal state can take place.<sup>11</sup> Cardillo's spatial constructions elicit a liminal sensory experience in the viewer.

Cardillo's compositional design was influenced by the artistic practice of Joaquín Torres-García (1874-1949), his Uruguayan predecessor.<sup>12</sup> Cardillo's mural, particularly his use of abstraction and geometric design was influenced by the universal constructivist method that Torres-García applied in

his *Cosmic Monument* (1938) a public sculpture installed in the Parque Rodó of Montevideo (Figure 5). The *Cosmic Monument* is a granite wall, engraved with pre-Hispanic glyphs, geometric forms, and a diverse array of figures. Although it is an exemplary piece of constructivist art and partially European in its concept, the free-standing block of stone itself conserves the form of the pre-Hispanic stele, just like the glyphic engravings and the relief carvings that evoke ancient pre-Hispanic art. In the *Cosmic Monument*, asymmetric grids fragment the planes of the wall's miniature cosmos. Rising from the grids, three dimensional granite ladders lead up the edges of the monument's wall. The ladders serve as a threshold between the actual and imaginary universe. The fountain that is installed at the center, and the three geometric objects—a cube, a globe and a pyramid—that extend from the edge also mediate between real and virtual space. Climbing up these ladders, reaching for the well or touching the geometric objects, the viewer can physically penetrate the wall's surface and inhabit its imaginary land, crossing the borders between present and past, the actual location of the park and the imaginary location of the ancient cosmos.

An artist of European and South-American heritage and of international artistic training, Torres-García combined both European and pre-Hispanic aesthetic registers in his art. Torres-García's interest in abstraction began during his early association with *De Stijl*, a European art movement led by Theo Van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian. *De Stijl* strived for a universal abstract aesthetic that would detach itself from natural forms and integrate the visual arts with architecture, but to Torres-García, geometric abstraction was also inherently linked to pre-Hispanic culture, particularly to pre-Hispanic architecture and cosmology. In response to the European movement, Torres-García and his disciples founded *Escuela del Sur*, the *School of the South*, appropriating *De Stijl's* primarily aesthetic agenda into a new cultural context.

*Escuela del Sur* moved beyond the specific concerns of the avant-garde movement, striving for autonomy and a detachment from the cultural center of Western Europe. Torres-García's synthetic iconography, which included a mixture of pre-Hispanic glyphs, as well as Christian, Classical Greek, or universal stylized motifs, represented a cultural extension of the Colonial period: a presence of a mixture of European and indigenous heritage due to the contemporaneous inflow of European immigrants to the coasts of Uruguay.<sup>13</sup>

Referring to Colonial history, as well as to the arbitrary definitions and terms that Colonial culture imposed on the continent, Torres-García inverted the map of South America and employed this map as his art school's logo. The map served as a commentary on the arbitrariness of geopolitical

<sup>9</sup> Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, Pilgrimage*. (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1979) 17.

<sup>10</sup> Turner 17.

<sup>11</sup> Turner 17.

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Cardillo, Gardiner, June, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Jorge Castillo et al., *Joaquín Torres-García and Theo van Doesburg: The Antagonistic Link* (Amsterdam: The Institute of Contemporary Art Amsterdam, 1991) 136.

terms, and represented the group's combined effort to replace European definitions with their own terms.<sup>14</sup>

In using abstraction and liminal compositional structures, Cardillo moves beyond Torres-García's goals to reconnect the history of the past with the present day. Cardillo uses photographic images and the techniques of reproductive printmaking to create a cognitive distance from his sources, the documentary images of the South American land and its archeological past. Once mediated by photography and printmaking, the meaning of the images is further layered and relocated through Cardillo's choice of their architectural settings.

Cardillo pulls images into his mural's wall from his own print series of guide maps and travel journals. These woodcuts are based on Cardillo's sketchbook recordings and written notations during his visit to *El Pantanal*, a strip of untouched wetlands along the Southern Amazon regions of South America, and his visits to cattle ranches (*estancias*) in Uruguay.<sup>15</sup> The *paraíso* tree and the cardinals are reproduced from these woodcuts (Figure 6). Cardillo's woodcuts can be located in the tradition of nineteenth-century travelers' and cartographers' reports, in their loose description of topography, the recording of natural vegetation and the presence of human settlement.<sup>16</sup> He imitates early travelers' maps by pressing the images on large plywood sheets that conserve the texture, rings and natural patterns of the wood.<sup>17</sup> However, Cardillo deconstructs the documentary function of the images already in the woodcuts, even before projecting them on the mural's walls, by abstracting and layering the images through compositional arrangement and toning. In *En la estancia* the fragmented, bubble-like figural silhouettes in the foreground bounce off, and the silhouettes in the background disintegrate behind a prism-like screen of overlapping tones. The translucent screen bars the viewer's direct access to the distant farmyard, with its *paraíso* tree, a house, a fence and several animals scattered in front.<sup>18</sup> Cardillo renders the everyday snapshot as distant and intangible as a mirage. The weightless figures of the animals remain elusive and specter-like. In *Porto Esperança* Cardillo takes written notes of the site name (*Ponte Barão, Río Bianco*) and the actual daytime (10 pm), then cuts the image of a bridge into a thick, undulating body of text, illegible to the extent it loses its documentary function and becomes a rhythmically flowing river (Figure 6).

In the New Paltz mural Cardillo detaches the images from their original context by the white abstract field and the geometric grids. It is not only the documentary images that are

copied onto the geometric field, but also the visual register of the campus landscape which reproduces the building materials and the design of the surrounding architecture. The pastel tiles of the mural and pastel bricks in the mural's courtyard accord with the design of the building and the yard in front. The hand-sketched tree on the mural's corner parallels the real tree standing close by. Through a play between real and virtual space, Cardillo blurs the clear boundary between the campus and the mural, laying out a zone of transition before the viewer. As Walter Benjamin explains, the technique of reproduction "permits the [object] to meet the beholder in his own particular situation."<sup>19</sup> By appropriating the original meaning of the object, reproduction "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence."<sup>20</sup>

The cultural and political role of the print, maps, and surveys is fleshed out in a chapter of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, a classic study in the sociology of culture and anthropology on the formation of national identity. In this work, Anderson describes the Western European imperial expansion of the 1870s as characterized by large-scale construction projects, and a fever for scientific surveys, travel reports, and census-taking.<sup>21</sup> As Anderson explains, these measures were applied to describe, define and classify native people, their language, and their history, to better implement control by the political administration of Western European nation states.<sup>22</sup> The most immediate purpose of construction projects and surveys was to rewrite the history of the native people of the colonies in order to demonstrate their declining economic and cultural trajectory.<sup>23</sup> This "new history" positioned Western Europe as a harbinger of economic and industrial progress and a legitimate guide of underdeveloped countries. Anderson's chapter is a case-study on Colonialism that takes Southeast Asia as its focus; looking through his model, however, one can easily recognize the imposition of "new histories" through architecture and the press in Colonial Latin America or for that matter, modern Uruguay, the regional contexts in which Cardillo's works are generated.

Among a large inventory of motifs and changing signs, Cardillo's inverted architectural and topographic planes—just like Torres-García's inverted maps—have become a consistent way to articulate his position in the cultural politics of art. Cardillo observes, and discovers the landscapes of his homeland by living in North America and traveling between continents. He deconstructs and critiques fixed national and cultural icons, and the notion of continuity in history to re-

<sup>14</sup> Castillo et al 139, 179.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Cardillo, Gardiner, July, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> The colonial map's theme has been previously discussed in context of pilgrimage and memory by Lucy Lippard. See Nieves 29-33.

<sup>17</sup> Interview July, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Interview December, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) 221.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin 221.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. (New York: Verso, 1991) 163-65.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson 163-165.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson 184.

combine their fragmentary forms into configurations that reflect a more complex and perhaps more accurate reality. To Torres-García's generation, art would always sustain a representative function. Although the origins and influence of *Escuela del Sur* expanded far beyond the borders of Uruguay, the School meant to represent Latin American cultures and developed political constructs of its own. The liminal architectural structures, concepts, and the grids in Cardillo's mural pay homage to Torres García's vast artistic legacy and his

critique of Eurocentric terminology. Yet Cardillo moves away from representative practices and beyond the confines of culturally-specific aesthetics. In his innovative combination of reproductive technique and spatial design in his New Paltz mural, Cardillo aims to re-enact transnational experience, to describe and juxtapose changing meanings of "environment" and "culture."

Williams College



Figure 1. Rimer Cardillo (Uruguay, 1944-), *Environment and Culture: From the Amazon to the Hudson River Valley*, August, 2004. Silkscreen on porcelain mosaic, 17 x 54 ft (5.18 x 16.45 m). Permanently installed on the Humanities Building, SUNY campus, New Paltz, New York. Photo courtesy of Rimer Cardillo, 2005.





Figure 2. Rimer Cardillo, *Environment and Culture: From the Amazon to the Hudson River Valley*, during installation. Photo courtesy of Rimer Cardillo, 2005.

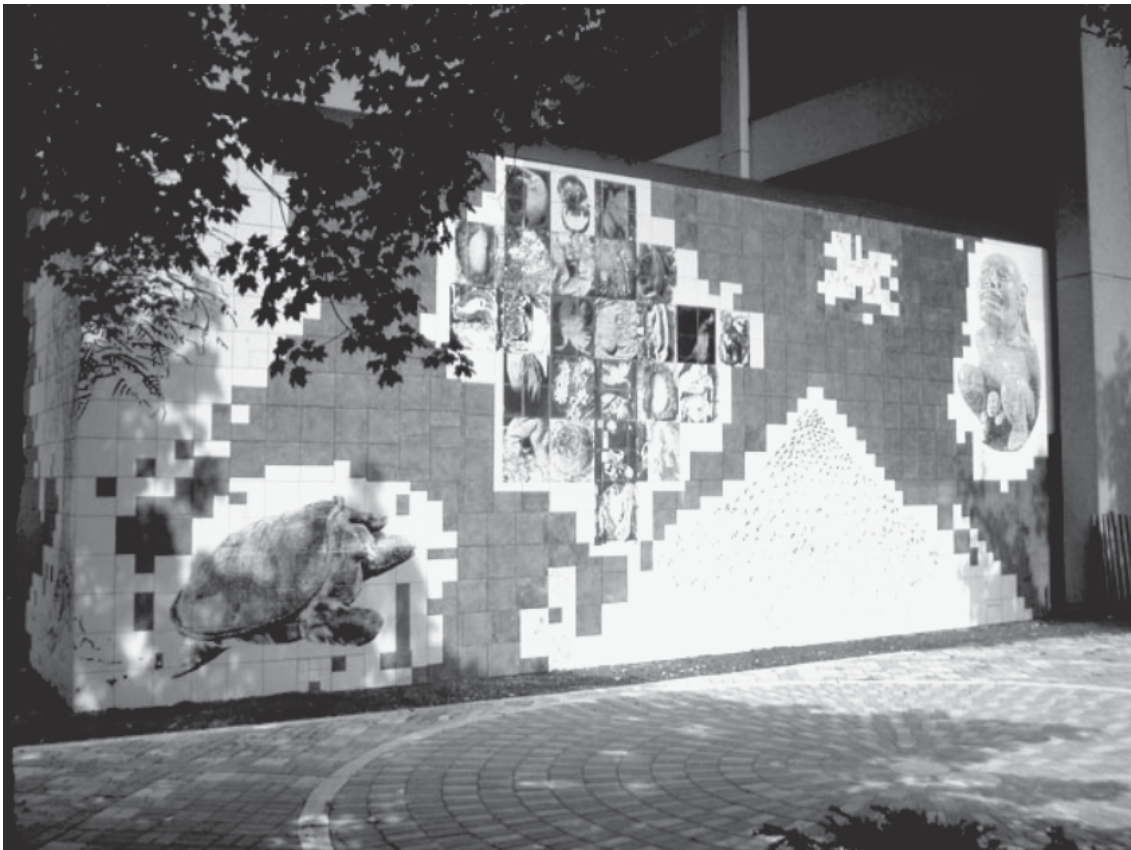


Figure 3. Rimer Cardillo, *Environment and Culture: From the Amazon to the Hudson River Valley*, front view. Photo courtesy of Viktoria Villanyi, 2005.



Figure 4. Rimer Cardillo, *Environment and Culture: From the Amazon to the Hudson River Valley*, joint shots of liminal architectural spaces. Photo courtesy of Rimer Cardillo, 2004.



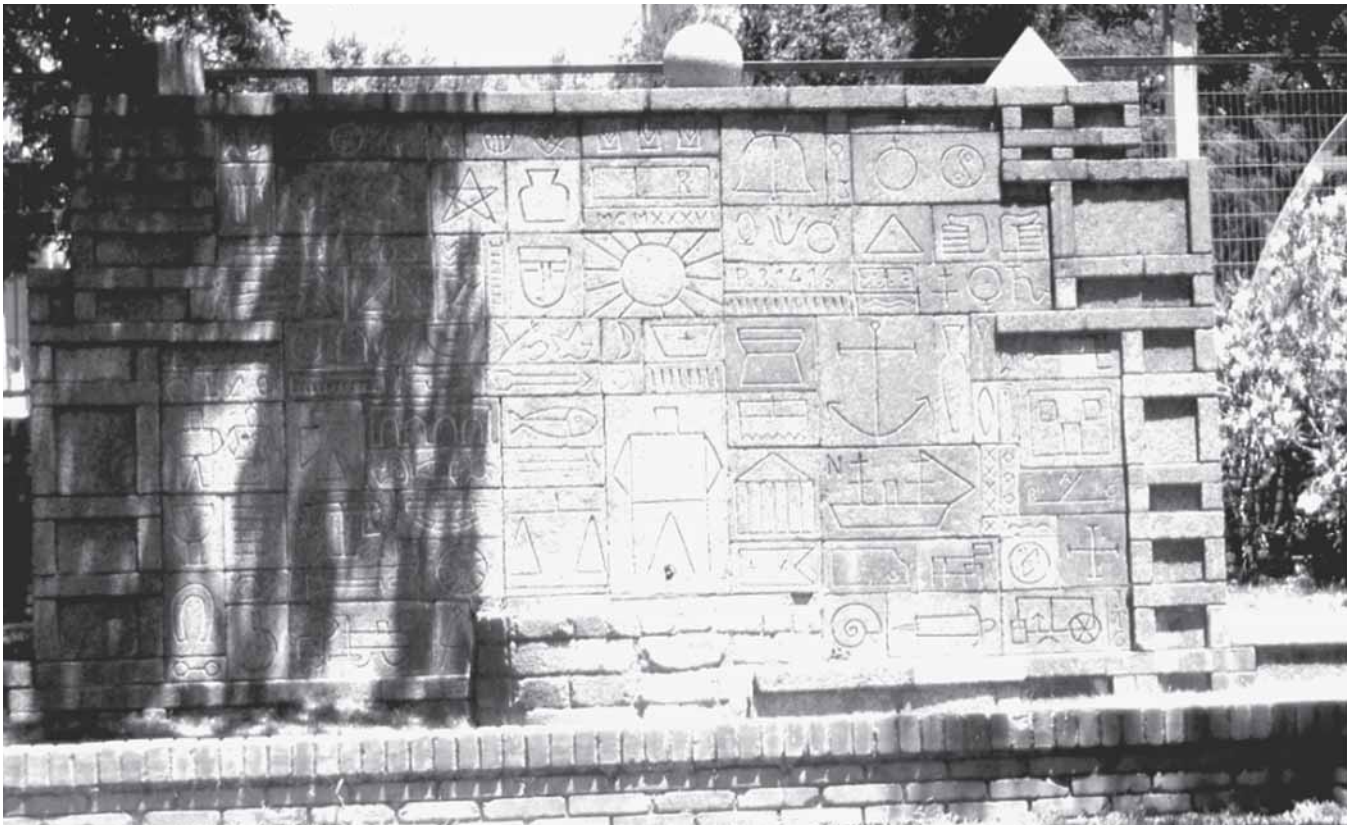


Figure 5. Joaquín Torres-García, *Cosmic Monument*, 1938. Engraved pink granite, 118 x 259 4/5 x 23 3/5 in (300 x 660 x 60 cm). Permanently installed in Parque Rodó, Montevideo. Photo courtesy of Rimer Cardillo, 2005.



Figure 6. Rimer Cardillo, *Porto Esperança (El Pantanal)*, 1998. Woodcut on plywood sheet. Sheet 42 5/16 x 31 inches (107 x 80 cm). Photo courtesy of Viktoria Villanyi, 2004.