Collapsing Autopia:
Feliza Bursztyn's *Chatarras*

a response by Letícia Cobra Lima

Luis Vasquez La Roche's approach to the history of extractive colonialism in Trinidad centers matter—the bodily, natural, and manufactured substances indexical of the ruinously systematized invasion, oppression, and exploitation in the Caribbean. He performs upon the soil where, half a century ago, sugarcane thrived——an industry that, throughout Latin America, relied on enslaved, and later precarious, racialized labor. The site now witnesses the artist's post-collapse retelling and reclaiming of past, present, and future, as it lays bare colonial-imperial teleologies of progress. In "Confection and the Aesthetic of Collapse," Ashleigh Deosaran situates Vasquez La Roche's multimedia artwork within Trinidadian history by setting the farcically conciliatory colonial discourse about the region's sugar plantations and its workers, found in prints and postcards dated from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, against Vasquez La Roche's prescient performance. The artist's engagement with an aesthetic of collapse is described as threefold by Deosaran: a physical collapse of sculptures that melt and become undone; a temporal collapse, as he substantiates the continuities between the colonial archive and contemporary culture and its biases; and a conceptual collapse, conceiving aesthetics for a decolonial, post-capitalist future where the rusting ruins of historical violence attest to the failure of ideologies of empire.

Deosaran's aesthetic of collapse is a productive framework in observing the work of another Latin American artist, sculptor Feliza Bursztyn (1933-1982), known for her junk metal assemblages and kinetic sculptures. Bursztyn's conceptualization and production

of artworks are intertwined with the collapse of mid-century developmentalism in Latin America, as she scavenged metal fragments of post-industrial, post-consumption waste, often selecting auto body parts. These were transformed into artworks of various sizes through what the artist considered to be destructive procedures: cutting, welding, folding. Bursztyn subverted gender norms and expectations in Latin America at the time, by utilizing tools and material from male-dominated trades, developing an idiosyncratic *oeuvre* that remains relevant in its haunting, rusted presence. Assemblages *Flor* (Flower, 1974) and *Chatarra de Automóvil* (Automobile Junk, 1980-81), analyzed here, provide insight into her artistic praxis—saturated, as it shall be demonstrated, with collapse.

Cars and trucks were among the main products that reached Latin American markets from the United States following World War I, in exchange for raw materials extracted from the region. In the 1930s, automotive infrastructure was among the defining measures of the Good Neighbor policy, when automotive travel through the American continent was made possible by the Pan American Highway.[1] During World War II, importation of motor vehicles from the United States was halted as a result of the war effort, allowing national automotive industries in Latin America to flourish. After the conflict, foreign companies proceeded to build automotive plants in the region.[2] The zeitgeist of developmental optimism and consumerism centered on cars is termed here as an "autopia." British architectural critic Peter Reyner Banham Hon coined this concept in his description of the four built ecologies of Los Angeles, to qualify the city's reliance on highways and its driving culture.[3] Heavily bolstered by U.S. American, post-war ideals of modernity, automotive infrastructure was expanded in metropolitan regions of Latin America over other means of transportation from the mid-to-late twentieth century, making driving inexorable. While it allowed the connection between far off regions and cities, it fundamentally, and often detrimentally, changed the lived experience, environment, and culture of the region. Bursztyn's auto body part assemblages whisper the ever-looming collapse of this imperialist, unsustainable autopia.

Born in Bogotá, Colombia, to Polish Jewish immigrant parents, Bursztyn trained as an artist from the early to late 1950s in the Arts Student League of New York, with a focus on painting, and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, where she studied sculpture under cubist Ossip Zadkine.[4] Zadkine introduced Bursztyn to Noveau

[1] Amy Spellacy, "Mapping the Metaphor of the Good Neighbor: Geography, Globalism, and Pan-Americanism during the 1940s," *American Studies* 47, no. 2 (2006): 39–66, 52.

[2] Joel Wolfe, "Populism and Developmentalism," in *A Companion to Latin American History*, ed. Thomas H. Holloway (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, n.d.), 347–64, 349; 354.

[3] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[4] Marta Dziewańska and Abigail Winograd, Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness (Milan: Skira, 2022), 12.

Réalist sculptor César Baldaccini, with whom she first experimented with welding and compacting junk metal using a hydraulic press.[5] Returning to Bogotá in 1958 at the end of the military dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-57), she found herself in a city without foundries that she could use, and lacked the financial means to even purchase *la chatarra*, that is, junk metal.[6] The artworks included in her first exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, *Las Chatarras* (The Junk, 1964), were created with instant coffee tins she found at a friend's house.[7]

In 1960, Bursztyn moved into a garage previously used by her father's textile factory, now converted into a living space and sculpture studio.[8] She frequented auto repair shops and junkyards to attain metal components with which to work, imposing an unsettling presence in spaces where few, if any, women could be found. By collecting and assembling leftovers of industrial production with tools utilized by mechanics or construction workers—male-dominated fields in Colombia at the time—earned her the title "the crazy woman" (*la loca*): a sexist, ableist moniker, but one that uncoupled her public image from traditional gender expectations and facilitated unconventional artistic practices. As she recounted in 1979: "I took advantage of being called crazy, and insisted on it, to really do what I wanted. Because I believe that we live in a sexist world. To be a sculptor and not a man is very difficult."[9]

Unprecedented in Colombia, Bursztyn's sculpture was initially deemed "anti-aesthetic" by the conservative public who favored traditional media.[10] Art critics—including Marta Traba, a pivotal figure in modern and contemporary art in Colombia—were however supportive of her work and its innovative formal repertoire.[11] The artist aimed at subverting sculptural procedures, and found in *la chatarra* the flexibility to create objects of variable sizes by manipulating metal through fire: "I love fire and the medium. The art of destruction, as it were. In fact, my work is the exact opposite of how sculpture is conceived. A sculptor draws a shape, searches for the material for said

[5] Adriana Peña Mejía, "Historia de la escultura moderna y de los viajes culturales de artistas colombianos a París después de 1945[*]," *Historia Crítica*, no. 58 (October 1, 2015): 139–54, 149.

[6] Camilo Leyva, Manuela Ochoa, and Juan Carlos Osorio, *Feliza Bursztyn: Elogio de la Chatarra* (Bogota: Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2009), 75; Maritza Uribe de Urdinola, "En Un País de Machistas, ¡hágase La Loca!," *El Tiempo: Revista Carrusel*, November 30, 1979, 15.

[7] Uribe de Urdinola, "En Un País de Machistas, ¡hágase La Loca!," 15.

[8] Leyva, Ochoa and Osorio, *Elogio de la Chatarra*, 77.

[9] Uribe de Urdinola, "En Un País de Machistas, ¡hágase La Loca!," 15; my translation.

[10] Peña Mejía, "Historia de la escultura moderna," 150.

[11] Peña Mejía, "Historia de la escultura moderna," 150.

shape, and executes it. (…) I go to junkyards, look at what they have, and then figure out what I am doing with it. I do not plan. I work directly with what I have."[12]

Bursztyn's employment of collapse as an aesthetic and conceptual procedure can be observed in works composed of autobody parts. For instance, *Flor* (Flower, 1974) is a public sculpture standing in front of the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia, in Cali, Colombia (fig. 1). Car bumpers sourced from junkyards in Bogotá, crumpled by crashes, are bunched together and welded from below in a circular arrangement onto a simple rectangular stand. The free-standing intertwined auto parts boast an organic quality despite their engineered, mass-produced origins. They are jagged, angular petals to a budding flower with no stem. In the context of the Museo La Tertulia, *Flor* interacts with both the modernist façade and colonnade of the museum, and the native flora of the mountains that surround it, reverberating with both the built and the native environs.

Figure 1. Feliza Bursztyn, *Flor*, 1974, welded found metal. Collection of public art of the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia (photograph provided by Pavel Vernaza, 2019, CC-BY-SA-4.0, open access via Wikipedia Commons).

[12] My translation. Miguel González, "Feliza Bursztyn," *Arte en Colombia*, no. 17 (December 1981), https://www.artnexus.com/es/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/5eea87dafa570d46cd6155ef/-17/feliza-bursztyn.

If in *Flor* the assembled pieces retain their automotive origin in shape, in *Chatarra de Automóvil* (Automobile Junk, 1980-81) the metal, sourced from variously colored cars, is corrugated, folded, welded, into seemingly impossible angles (fig. 2). Its title is matter of fact, referencing naught but the artwork itself, the viewer thus made to ruminate on the intricacies of the material, the gradient of primary colors to oil stains and even rust. The gesture of the artist evokes a presence, a choreography of artistic labor memorialized in weld lines and spatter. In *Flor* the acts of collecting, selecting, and arranging the parts is put into relief, while in the later *Chatarra de Automóvil* the ease of expression gained through the practice of metalwork is evident. The metal gains plasticity and fluency—though clearly identifiable as junk metal, it is imbued with a novel morphology, literally bending to Bursztyn's will. From cutting-edge technology of yore to overflowing junk, *la chatarra* leads the artist to an idiosyncratic set of artistic practices that magnifies everyday cycles of capitalist decay through destruction.

Figure 2. Feliza Bursztyn, *Chatarra de Automóvil*, 1980-81, welded found metal. Exhibited in *Feliza Bursztyn: Elogio de La Chatarra*, Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2009-10 (photograph provided by Guillermo Vasquez, 2010, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, https://flic.kr/p/7BaQKp)

In sourcing scraps, the refuse of mass production and upper- and middle-class lifestyles, the artist puts into relief cycles of designed obsolescence and waste production imbricated in capitalist production and consumption. If Luis Vasquez La Roche performs in front of the rusted structures of the sugar industry, Bursztyn sorts through the profuse, decaying remnants of an autopia. This car-centric, modernizing impetus determined and reshaped the infrastructure in Latin American countries from the mid- to late-twentieth century, having disastrous consequences to the quality of life in cities and in the natural environment. The extraction of fossil fuels, such as petroleum and natural gas, continues to disrupt biomes and indigenous communities that populate

them. Reliance on such resources increases air pollution, and the massive circulation of cars generates congestion and reduces walkability in urban spaces.[13]

La chatarra is the collapse of autopia as idea and material culture, while Bursztyn relied on the freedom of movement and action provoked by a collapse of gender expectations towards her eccentric public figure. The metal, originally molded by heavy machinery, must be pleated, cut, joined, welded by hand, losing its previously designed shape through a series of destructive procedures, being increasingly emptied of its intended purpose. Ontological collapse, the original purpose and nature of an object or part negated in favor of its potential for transformation, is followed by the temporal collapse inherent to assemblage. Unearthed from times and spaces undistinguishable in the junkyard, components are made to interact into a tridimensional palimpsest, original (con)texts only half legible and collapsing into one another.[14] That which was discarded in the past and decayed in the present is thrust back into visibility and communicability, its meanings highly contingent on the viewer's interpretation.[15]

Ashleigh Deosaran posits the apt lens of collapse, through which one may assess the many facets and complexities of modern and contemporary art from Latin America and the Caribbean. In these domains, the lingering aftereffects of colonization and subalternation are continuously interrogated, bringing to the fore current systems that sustain class-based, gendered, and racialized oppression. Collapse allows us to envision alternative, creative routes through the impending downfall of arbitrary, immoral systems towards renewal, resistance, and agency.

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[13] Lisa Viscidi and Rebecca O'Connor, "The Energy of Transportation: A Focus on Latin American Urban Transportation," in *Energy and Transportation in the Atlantic Basin*, ed. Paul Isbell and Eloy Álvarez Pelegry (Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations / Brookings Institution Press, n.d.), 91–126, accessed January 27, 2023. For a critique of the sociopolitical impact of cars, see André Gorz, "The Social Ideology of the Motorcar," 1973, 594ES, Atlas of Places, https://atlasofplaces.com/essays/the-social-ideology-of-the-motorcar/.

[14] Palimpsest originally refers to a parchment upon which information was inscribed after an earlier inscription had been erased. The act of erasing an inscription left traces of it on the surface, which interacted with the succeeding text. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 158.

[15] Jonathan D. Katz, "'Committing the Perfect Crime': Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 38–53, 49.

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