

@Henr Althusser  
 DANS LE MOIS D'AOUT 1978 IL Y AURA UNE  
 EXPOSITION RETROSPECTIVE SUR MON TRAVAIL  
 (TABLEAUX, GRAPHIQUE, CERAMIQUE, LIVRES, ETC)  
 DANS LA MAISON DE LA COUTURE DE NANTERRE -  
 THEATRE DES AMANDIERS.

## MUTE CRIES

LOUIS ALTHUSSER BETWEEN

ROBERTO ÁLVAREZ RÍOS AND WIFREDO LAM

BÉCQUER SEGUIN

On August 18, 1977, Wifredo Lam wrote a two-page letter to Louis Althusser. By 1977, Lam had established himself as the most important Cuban artist not only of his generation, but perhaps of the 20th century. Lam was born in Cuba in 1902 to a Chinese father and a mother of African and Spanish ancestry. He left the island to study art in Spain, fighting for the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War and eventually seeking exile in France, where he would meet important figures in the art world, including Pablo Picasso and André Breton. Through Breton's Surrealist group, Lam's work reached an international audience, and Lam maintained close personal and intellectual ties to artists in the School of Paris and the New York School. But, in keeping with his multifaceted heritage, his style—which blended such disparate themes as orisha from the Yoruba religion, Cubism, and Surrealism—never fit comfortably in either school.<sup>1</sup>

Even before Lam and Althusser corresponded in 1977, it is likely that they had already met in the 1960s. Lam had held three individual exhibitions at the gallery La Cour d'Ingres, run by Althusser's friend Inna Salomon; his first exhibition there ran from May to June of 1961,

1 Lowery Stokes Sims, "African American Artists and Postmodernism: Reconsidering the Careers of Wifredo Lam, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Robert Colescott," in *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View*, ed. David C. Driskell (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 110–11.

18-8-77

Cher Althusser,

Dans le Mois d'Avril 1978 il y aura une  
 Exposition Retrospective sur mon travail  
 (Graphique, Economique, livres etc)  
 dans la Maison de la Culture de Nanterre.  
 Theatre des Amandiers.

Cet événement sera entrecouper par  
 mon pays, avec différentes manifestations,  
 Poésies, Theatre, films, Conférences etc.

Notre Ami Alain Jouffroy m'a dit vous  
 avoir parlé de ce projet et du plaisir  
 que j'aurai d'avoir une présentation de  
 vous dans le Catalogue. Pour ce que je  
 représente comme peintre né dans le  
 tiers monde, dans cette lutte qui nous  
 engage tous aujourd'hui.

Dans le Catalogue @ HABITAZOUD EPABE-  
 BENT AIME @ ESAIRE, (ALIA MADRUE),  
 AARJO CARPENTER, SEBASTIAN YASH, et  
 Alain Jouffroy.

DE VOTRE REponse, NOUS POUVONS NOUS  
 RECONSTRUIRE DE D'UN DE MES VOYAGES  
 A PARIS A PARTIR DU 15 SEPTEMBRE.

SALUTATIONS

W. Lam

47, Bd. BEAUSÉJOUR  
 PARIS 16  
 TEL: 286-52-10

Letter from Wifredo Lam to Louis Althusser, August 18, 1977. Image courtesy of Louis Althusser/IMEC.

his last, from May to June of 1976.<sup>2</sup> Lam asked Althusser in his letter for a contribution to an exhibition catalog for an upcoming retrospective the following spring at the Maison de la Culture in Nanterre, just outside Paris. Lam's request was unusual. Althusser was a Marxist philosopher of some renown, whose day job at the École Normale Supérieure involved giving lecture courses and seminars on subjects ranging from Machiavelli to Rousseau. He had become an influential leftist intellectual figure following the publications, both in November 1965, of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. These were two collections of essays: the first, individual; the second, collective, which included essays from Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière, among others.<sup>3</sup> Within Marxist Marxism, he had effectively taken the baton from Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>4</sup> But Althusser's work circulated well beyond French, or even European, borders. Thanks to journals such as *Pasado y Presente*,

2 Michel Leiris, *Wifredo Lam* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970), iii.

3 See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* [1965], trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005); Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Estabiet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, eds., *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* [1965], trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016).

4 Gregory Elliot masterfully outlines this intellectual history, which also includes Claude Lévi-Strauss and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1–53.

in Argentina, or *Historia y Sociedad*, in Mexico, and publishing houses such as Siglo XXI, his books and essays “circulated as required reading among Mexican, Argentine, Chilean, Cuban intellectuals” from the second half of the 1960s onward.<sup>5</sup> His writings, which were quickly translated, reached broad swaths of the New Left in Latin America and reshaped important debates over populism, the reception of Gramsci, or anti-Stalinist readings of Marx.<sup>6</sup>

Althusser’s structural Marxism would also influence later generations of art historians, ranging from T. J. Clark to Hal Foster, despite the fact that he had very rarely written on art.<sup>7</sup> By the time of his death in 1990, he had only penned five essays on the subject.<sup>8</sup> The irony of asking a philosopher who, in many respects, only wrote on a narrow range of subjects was not lost on Lam. He writes in the letter, “Aimé Césaire, García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, Sebastián Gash, and Alain Jouffroy will contribute to the catalog.” It appears as though the references to Césaire, García Márquez, and Carpentier were included in order to sweeten the request. It is likely that Althusser had met the writers during one of their many trips to Paris. Lam, Césaire, and Carpentier also shared strong, though often fraught, connections with the French Communist Party (PCF), of which Althusser had been a

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- 5 Jaime Ortega Reyna, “El cerebro de la pasión: Althusser en tres revistas mexicanas,” *Revista Izquierdas* 25 (2015): 143.
  - 6 For Althusser’s reception in Cuba, Mexico, and Argentina, see Jaime Ortega Reyna, “Incendiar el océano: Notas sobre la(s) recepción(es) de Althusser en Cuba,” *De Raíz Diversa* 2, no. 4 (2015): 129–53; Marcelo Starcenbaum, “El marxismo incómodo: Althusser en la experiencia de *Pasado y Presente* (1965–1983),” *Revista Izquierda* 11 (2011): 35–53; and Anna Popovitch, “Althusserianism and the Political Culture of the Argentine New Left,” *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. 1 (2014): 203–22.
  - 7 T. J. Clark’s development of social art history owes a great deal to his desire to distance his version of Marxism from Althusser’s. See T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 9–20. See also Keith P. F. Moxey, “Semiotics and the Social History of Art,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 4 (1991): 985–99; and T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International,” *October* 79 (1997): 23–24. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1–32.
  - 8 The essays on art include “A Young Cuban Painter before Surrealism: Álvarez-Ríos” (1962), “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract” (1966), “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre” (1966), “On Lucio Fanti” (1977), and “Lam” (1977), the first and last of which are translated here. See Louis Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre” and “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 221–28, 229–42. In addition to his essays on art, Althusser published several essays on theater during the same period. See Louis Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht” [1962], in *For Marx*, 129–51; and Louis Althusser, “On Brecht and Marx,” trans. Max Statkiewicz, in Warren Montag, ed., *Louis Althusser* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 136–49.



Álvarez Ríos's use of "primordial and innocent forms" as a metaphor for creation.<sup>12</sup> Yet, for Pierre, the artist avoids the temptation of condescension. Álvarez Ríos, he writes, "does not seek to impose by burnings, genocide and rape of conscience," conceits so common to many creation metaphors; he instead seeks "a true renaissance, which would discard the scum of humanity."<sup>13</sup>

Álvarez Ríos had recently moved to Paris from Havana. Born in 1932, he studied at the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro from 1949 to 1955. In 1958, he moved to Paris in order to study drawing and painting at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, taking part in the Biennale des Jeunes in Paris in both 1959 and 1961, before the solo exhibition at La Cour d'Ingres in the winter of 1962. By the time that Althusser's essay appeared in print in late November, the two had already met. Álvarez Ríos's brother, a lawyer who worked for UNESCO in Paris, had met Althusser over dinner about a month earlier, on October 27, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Also in attendance at the dinner were Althusser's wife, Hélène, Claudine Fitte, a French translator of the Peruvian writers Jose María Arguedas and Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, and Pierre Gaudibert, who would later become an influential curator of contemporary art at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.<sup>14</sup> Not long after that meeting, Althusser would invite Álvarez Ríos and his wife over for dinner and learn that "Ríos works in a basement at the *Cité universitaire*, in a single room (he's married), with no space, almost no light."<sup>15</sup>

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12 José Pierre, "A l'étonnement du colibri," in *Álvarez Ríos*.

13 Pierre, "A l'étonnement du colibri."

14 Louis Althusser to Franca Madonia, October 27, 1962, *Lettres à Franca (1961–1973)*, ed. François Matheron and Yann Moulrier Boutang (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1995), 261. Two more letters in this collection reference Althusser's relationship with Álvarez Ríos. See Louis Althusser to Franca Madonia, December 1, 1962, and December 10, 1962, in Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, 289, 294. The second of the letters was originally written in Italian. Pierre Gaudibert was instrumental in introducing Althusser to a number of artists, including Leonardo Cremonini, the subject of one of his essays on art. See Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 51. Gaudibert's influence on contemporary art curating in France has received more attention of late, thanks in large part to Wilson's work. See Wilson, *Visual World*, 25, 36, 104–6, 192–93. For a study focused more on institutional history, see Rebecca J. DeRoo, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41, 54–56.

15 The dinner is referenced in Wilson, *Visual World*, 222. All citations of Althusser's Álvarez Ríos and Lam essays, as well as of Lam's letter to Althusser, refer to the translations in the present issue.



In his essay, Althusser sees in the work of Álvarez Ríos the “[f]reedom to denounce slavery; to exalt the revolutionary struggle . . . ; to invoke a future peace.” Freedom and peace, especially, appear to be the structuring principles that, for Althusser, guided Álvarez Ríos’s political intervention in art. The humanist language of “freedom” and “peace,” which might sound peculiar to most readers of Althusser, points to his own intellectual history, which began in Christianity, before passing through Hegel, and culminated in structural Marxism. The Álvarez Ríos essay captures Althusser in the midst of self-criticism, still holding on to terms from humanism, yet embracing a structural Marxism centered on ideology critique. During the early 1960s, the PCF had become embroiled in a *querelle du humanisme*, pitting existentialism against Marxism and, implicitly, the iconic but aging Sartre against the young and ambitious Althusser. Althusser’s first public pronouncement on the debate, “Marxism and Humanism,” would not be published until two years later, in 1964, and would take aim less at Sartre’s version of existentialist humanism than at the new policy of “socialist humanism” developed in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev.

Sarah Wilson has framed the early 1960s as a passing of the baton from Sartre to Althusser in the world of philosophical writing on art in France. As she writes in *The Visual World of French Theory*:

Althusser’s writing on art, compared with Sartre’s, marks a change between two modes of representation and, indeed, two different epochs. Sartre’s art writing continued within the mode of an existentialist humanism which embraced not only Giacometti’s figurative painting and sculpture in the 1940s and 50s but also the semi-abstract *informel* work by Lapoujade and the politicized expressionism of Paul Rebeyrolle in 1970. Althusser, by contrast, moved from an early experiment with a “colonial” late Surrealism to the advocacy of a “critical” painting where the role of theory was important: Narrative Figuration.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, in 1962 a specific kind of anticolonial art and humanist vocabulary to describe art connected Sartre and Althusser. Sartre, at the time, had just written the preface for Robert Lapoujade’s catalog for an exhibition of pieces that depicted torture and the Algerian war. Althusser, meanwhile, was writing on Álvarez Ríos at the time that the

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16 Wilson, *Visual World*, 40–42.

artist's home country of Cuba was standing between more than a century of US colonial aggression and the nascent expansion of the Soviet Union's satellite states during the Cold War. Sartre's and Althusser's language for describing art prized the blending of concepts such as peace, freedom, and struggle, and was based on their shared understanding of Hegel and, by extension, the fundamental role of aesthetics in philosophy. Just several years later, however, Althusser's stance on the so-called "humanist controversy" would shift dramatically, directly impacting his writing on art.

Where "Marxism and Humanism" had focused on USSR policy, Althusser increasingly clashed with the Central Committee of the PCF over what he called his "theoretical antihumanism." The controversy came to a head in a meeting during the spring of 1966 and, by the time Althusser's most well-known piece of art criticism, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," was published in the winter of 1966, he had changed the ending of the article. Wilson notes that its original conclusion, written in 1964, had referred to "man," whereas the new ending instead substituted "ideology" and structural concepts such as "element."<sup>17</sup> "Peace" and other words from the Álvarez Ríos essay would quickly drop out of Althusser's vocabulary,<sup>18</sup> while "freedom" would



Roberto Álvarez Ríos in front of the Maison de Cuba in Paris, 1960. Photograph. Artist's collection. Image courtesy of Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Visual World*, 62–63.

<sup>18</sup> There existed in the PCF a growing resistance to the word "peace" following the Twenty-Second Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1961. This resistance primarily stemmed from those members whose politics more closely aligned with those of the Communist Party of China, which viewed Khrushchev's policy of "peaceful coexistence and competition" as a capitulation to imperialism. Though Althusser was careful to distance himself from Maoism, Gregory Elliot has argued that he was largely sympathetic to this critique. See Elliot, *Althusser*, 5–11.

take on a new meaning following the publication, in 1967, of his essay on Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>19</sup> The volumes *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* would solidify this intellectual shift toward structuralism.

In the Álvarez Ríos essay, Althusser argues that Surrealism itself was undergoing an important intellectual shift. Álvarez Ríos's exhibition at La Cour d'Ingres, which featured such works as *Vers une transfiguration* (Toward a Transfiguration), for Althusser, "pose[d] anew the question of surrealism."<sup>20</sup> Surrealism was thriving in countries such as Mexico and Chile, where Remedios Varo, Roberto Matta, and other artists were becoming household names. Yet, in France during the early 1960s, Surrealism appeared to be in crisis. The crisis was above all political. The Algerian war, which had escalated into violence from 1952, pressed the importance of anticolonialism into the conscience of French Surrealists, so much so that, in 1960, a number of them wrote the so-called "declaration of the 121," a statement that included more than 200 writers, philosophers, journalists, trade unionists, entertainers, and others as signatories.<sup>21</sup> In a sense, the "question of Surrealism" was the Algerian question by another name.

Althusser underscores an intellectual shift within Surrealism whereby artists began looking to colonial contexts, such as Algeria or, indeed, Cuba, for new political models of organization and critique. In 1962, Surrealism in France, Althusser writes in the Álvarez Ríos essay, "is like a church with its masses and its Latin, its syntax and its vocabulary, . . . it even has its prayers." In other words, Surrealism had become institutionalized and, thus, intellectually and politically atrophied. His essay was a way to come to grips with Surrealism's persistence as an artistic vocabulary. As he asks in the essay, "Why should the freedom of Lam, [Agustín] Cárdenas, of Cubans such as Ríos, not to mention [Roberto] Matta—a Chilean—and other Latin Americans have bor-

19 Whereas in Althusser's earlier writings on Hegel the concept of freedom "delivers a subject from his subjection," his writings during the late 60s and 70s, consistent with his argument in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" from 1970, treat freedom as impossible to achieve. Louis Althusser, "On Content in the Thought of G. W. F. Hegel" [1947], in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 1997), 90. See also Louis Althusser, "Rousseau's State of Pure Nature" [1972], trans. G. M. Goshgarian, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 15 May 2016; Louis Althusser, "Rousseau: The Social Contract," in *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left, 1972), 113–60.

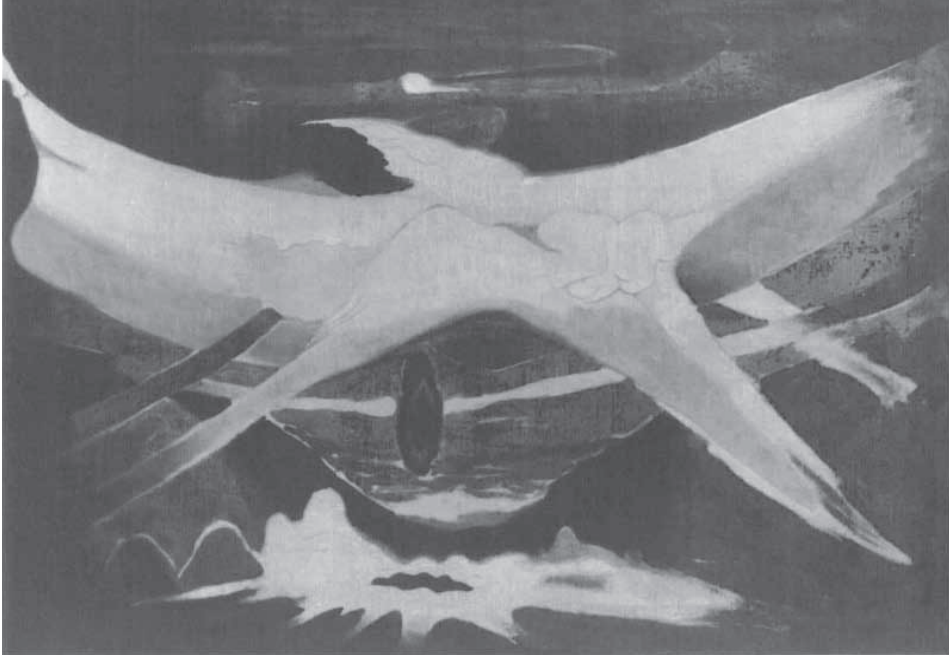
20 Emphasis in original.

21 Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 592–94.



rowed this language? And, having borrowed it, was that freedom able to transform it?” His answer: “Without a doubt because of the effect produced by the profound affinities with the living past of a world, with the matter of a working class life that is close by: that language does not have there the same meaning it had here.” In the essay, history appears as one of those concepts tinged with humanism that Althusser is still in the process of leaving behind. It sits uneasily next to the structuralist approach to capitalist relations he would develop during the middle of the decade. This is why Althusser here argues that material history is a distant memory in Europe. Europe, he writes, suffered “a lost, perverse history whose meaning one wanted to tame at all costs.” History in Europe, he notes, was something that was not lived so much as explained, guided by analyses of institutional arrangements rather than those of the individuals who struggled against them. It is as if the shifting meanings of language across time, for Althusser, might register the material differences between such regions as Europe and Latin America. He saw in Latin America a reversed order of knowledge: history came from intimacy, embodiment, and experience, not from the detachment of institutions. Such an embodied view of history is certainly problematic, though consistent with a certain intellectual discourse in France at the time concerning the Third World. Althusser’s use of history in the essay on Álvarez Ríos, in line with Sartre’s and others’ humanism, posits human agency as its motor. One can see this especially in Althusser’s schematic, which pits Álvarez Ríos and other Latin American artists against the church of French Surrealism, human agency against institutional detachment. Althusser was in the midst of disowning this view of history. Essays such as “On the Young Marx” (1961) began to sketch his critique of various strains in Marxism that posited a subject to history. Althusser argued instead that history was a process without a subject.

In the Álvarez Ríos essay, he still praised Latin American art for grappling with the fundamental materialism of “men and nature, of slaves and masters, of death and freedom.” Such typologies unwittingly reified the intellectual hierarchies between Latin America and Europe. Like many philosophers and intellectuals of his day, Althusser partook in the routine exoticism of the Third World. Latin Americans, in Althusser’s telling, used “natural language” and the “discourse of a nascent history” in their Surrealist paintings. At one moment in the essay, he describes a painting’s “great harmony among men, skies,



Roberto Álvarez Ríos, *The Universal Dove of Peace, Paris*, 1960. Oil on canvas. 130 x 197 cm. 1961. Artist's collection. Image courtesy of Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 54.

birds, and women; in a word, happiness.” Althusser’s essay on Álvarez Ríos paints a picture of a preserved primordial utopia amidst capitalism’s alienated dystopia. An artist like Lam, in fact, would have been the first to challenge such an argument. His interest in Afro-Cuban subjects ranging from cosmology to kinship can be said to have stemmed from mainstream Cuban society’s rejection of them during the 1940s and 50s, and not from their overwhelming presence. Yet what remains important to note about Althusser’s framing of what, at first glance, appeared to be a curiously humanist argument is its structure. “His text,” writes Wilson, “constantly uses the dialectical play of concepts.”<sup>22</sup> The dialectical structure, albeit filled with Hegelian themes, appears central to understanding Althusser’s shift from an early, Hegelian Marx to a structuralist Marx. The dialectic again appeared in Althusser’s work the following year in a text related to art: a series of conversations he shared with Leonardo Cremonini, published anonymously in the monthly *Révolution* in 1963. For Althusser, Cremonini’s was “engaged art reflecting the dialectic of the modern world.”<sup>23</sup> It is safe to assume that Althusser would have made the same claim about Álvarez Ríos.

22 Wilson, *Visual World*, 55.

23 Leonardo Cremonini and “X,” “Artisanat populaire et artisanat colonisé,” *Révolution* (November 1963): 76–79; cited in Wilson, *Visual World*, 57.

Perhaps Althusser's most striking claim in the Álvarez Ríos article concerns language. He emphasizes the importance of "the singular difference, so astonishing, between *two forms of speaking the same language*."<sup>24</sup> The language here is Surrealism, and the two forms of speaking it amount to French Surrealism and Latin American Surrealism. Key to Althusser's claim is Álvarez Ríos's fluency in both. "Such is Ríos's moving charm," Althusser continues. "He 'speaks' surrealist in the same way that he 'speaks' French: as a language born before him." Not unlike his embodied view of history, language here plays an important role in connecting disparate material conditions. For Althusser, Álvarez Ríos's intimate familiarity with French Surrealism makes his adoption and transformation of it all the more significant. The same might be said of Lam, Matta, Cárdenas, and other Latin American Surrealists who traveled extensively and became well acquainted with the movement's evolution in Paris. The anticolonial turn in Surrealism owes a great deal to them. Álvarez Ríos's 1962 exhibition, for example, connected the Latin American and African struggles through works such as *L'Afrique en question*. Yet Althusser also writes about "the application of his [Álvarez Ríos's] voice to that language [of Surrealism]: in his speech, his accent, his syntactic and semantic invention." Thus, the essay retains some basic humanist assumptions, such as the singular ability of individuals to transform such structural aspects of society as language—assumptions that would all but fall out of his thinking by the end of the decade.

A rather different Althusser responded to Lam's letter on October 13, 1977, just over two months after receiving it. Althusser's return letter contained only his two-page typed manuscript of the requested catalog essay, which he titled simply "Lam." The retrospective in Nanterre, scheduled for that April, would eventually be canceled. It is unclear why.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition catalog would have featured Althusser's essay alongside essays from Aimé Césaire, Gabriel García Márquez, and Alejo Carpentier. Lam, in fact, had reconnected with García Márquez

<sup>24</sup> Emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> In August of 1978, Lam suffered a massive stroke, paralyzing the left side of his body, while working in Albissola, Italy. It appears, however, that he was in very good health until then. See Gerardo Mosquera, "My Painting Is an Act of Decolonization": An Interview with Wifredo Lam by Gerardo Mosquera (1980), trans. Coleen Kattau and David Craven, *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 3, no. 1–2 (2009): 1; see also Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923–1982* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 149, 163, 190.



Roberto Álvarez Ríos, *Human Beings, Wars, Invasions, etc. Enough!*. Oil on canvas, 200 x 127 cm. 1965. Artist's collection.  
Image courtesy of Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 56.

just months earlier, in June of 1977, on the occasion of an exhibition of his lithographs in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana, some of which were created to accompany the latter's poem "El último viaje del buque fantasma" (1976).<sup>26</sup> A few poems from Césaire and an essay from Carpentier, together with Althusser's, would see the light of day following Lam's death in 1982, when they were included in a catalog accompanying three exhibitions in Madrid, Paris, and Brussels to commemorate and celebrate Lam's work.<sup>27</sup> In his earlier essay on Álvarez Ríos, Althusser had explicitly referenced Lam. "In 1950," he writes, "still in Havana, [Álvarez Ríos] meets *Lam*, whose exhibition deeply affects him."<sup>28</sup> The word "*Lam*" is italicized, as if emphasizing Álvarez Ríos's formative experience and Lam's towering presence in Cuban art.

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- 26 Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam*, 198. See also Lam's photo next to Márquez in María R. Balderrama, ed., *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries, 1938–1952* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992), 97.
- 27 Louis Althusser, "Lam," in *Wifredo Lam, 1902–1982* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne, 1983), 118. García Márquez's essay was not included in the volume. Alejo Carpentier, Untitled, trans. Aline Vidal, in *Wifredo Lam*, 29–30; Aimé Césaire, "Wifredo Lam . . .," in *Wifredo Lam*, 31; Aimé Césaire, "Conversation avec Mantónica Wilson," in *Wifredo Lam*, 32; Aimé Césaire, "Genèse pour Wifredo," in *Wifredo Lam*, 32.
- 28 Emphases in original.

But, for Althusser, Lam was not a stand-in for an outmoded kind of Surrealism; he was actively partaking in its reinvention.

In his essay on Lam, Althusser again makes use of what appears to be a humanist argument as a way of stating the importance of Lam's art for European thought. He argues that Lam gives voice to "the mute cry of a people crushed by centuries of history. In humility such a refusal of humiliation, in peace the tension of such a violence. This is why Lam's world is at once our own: because he lays it bare." Unlike his essay on Álvarez Ríos, Althusser's text on Lam relinquishes the distinction that had earlier separated Latin America's "nascent history" from Europe's "lost history." Althusser here no longer laments Europe's perceived acquiescence to capitalism or celebrates Latin America's supposed safeguarded connections to nature and humanity. He also does away with his previous reliance on what he calls "beings and their forms" and instead locates the process of history at the center of Lam's work. But, as with Álvarez Ríos, Lam's most distinctive ability, for Althusser, is his use of language. Lam is "this foreign man who speaks in silence our unknown language, and we hear him." Whereas Álvarez Ríos, for Althusser, had two forms of speaking the same language, Lam has one that appears equally powerful: the ability to speak an unknown language silently. Though Althusser himself gives few hints, his reference to an unknown language points to Lam's syncretic art, which borrows from numerous traditions, not all artistic, yet belongs to none of them. Nevertheless, as in his Álvarez Ríos essay, Althusser identifies Lam's language, which draws attention above all to a common experience of historical suffering, as that which bridges the isolated corners of the international art world, reflecting back its own ignorance and vanity. (He argues, repeatedly, that Lam's humility is key to comprehending his impact on art.)

Althusser additionally makes the case, again by way of language, for understanding Lam's art in Freudian terms. "Freud spoke of a strange familiarity, of the uncanny. Lam's great birds," he writes, "made of sun and night and more than birds, are strange perhaps, just as those enigmatic beings stretched in the infinity of an air too rarefied not to be the void." The concepts that guide his analysis—"infinity," "the void," and even "the uncanny"—are, above all, structural and not humanistic. And one in particular, "the void," suggests that, though Althusser explicitly references Freud, he is channeling the thought of his contemporary, Jacques Lacan. Lacan's notion of the void is

important for understanding his structural psychoanalysis. In his seminar from 1959–60, commonly titled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan illustrates his concept of the void with the example of the vase. The vase, for Lacan, “creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it. Emptiness and fullness are [thus] introduced into a world that by itself knows not of them.”<sup>29</sup> The idea is that the vase gives symbolic form to the emptiness inside it by revealing its shape. In other words, one cannot see the void itself, but rather its effects on other things.<sup>30</sup> Understanding Althusser’s essay with Lacan in mind helps us reconsider his cryptic statement about Lam’s painting. The reason Althusser calls the birds in Lam’s painting “more than birds” may be because, for him, they signify the void. The birds give meaning to a truth that cannot be perceived directly, but only by way of its effect on other objects. The metaphor also works in reverse: Lam’s art, like that of Álvarez Ríos and other Latin American Surrealists, has reinvented the language of Surrealism, imperceptibly to those in Europe, yet nonetheless consequentially as well.

Althusser’s adoption in the essay of the language of psychoanalysis was—as it was throughout much of his career—tepid at best. His unease with the language of psychoanalysis was also mirrored in his incorporation of concepts that would, by the 1980s, become associated with what he called “aleatory materialism” or “materialism of the encounter.” Though much evidence points to a continuation, these two phrases name what at least superficially appears to be a major shift in Althusser’s philosophy from the late 1970s until his death in 1990. With the “materialism of the encounter,” Althusser identified in some of Marx’s writings an idealist strand that he sought to overcome through a subterranean reading of his materialist predecessors, which included Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Throughout these writings, he dispensed with his earlier claim concerning philosophy’s scientific disposition and instead, in an echo of Lacan, asserted the void as philosophy’s only object. As in Lacan’s

29 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 120.

30 For a thorough and lucid discussion of Lacan’s concept of “the void,” see Alenka Zupančič, “Ethics and Tragedy in Lacan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 184–90.



example of the vase, philosophy's capacity, for Althusser, was limited to describing the effects or patterns of truth rather than truth itself. Philosophy's only epistemological bases were the following three theses: matter is all that exists, chance is the basis for its movement, and new worlds are thus created by chance encounters. Nonetheless, Althusser's essay on Lam again catches him in the midst of a transition, this time from structural Marxism toward what he would, by 1986, call "aleatory materialism." The essay finds him, while looking at Lam's *Grande composition* from 1960, questioning this new vocabulary that he will eventually adopt. "[N]eed we speak the risky language of the encounter?" he asks in the essay on Lam. His answer: "Better that of the entrance," which he justifies by arguing that this concept of entry exists in "the nearest of spaces and the most familiar of worlds." Nothing else in the essay, however, clues us in to the reason behind his rejection of "encounter." As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, the term "encounter" would prevail over "entrance" in Althusser's writing. For him, the "encounter," by foregrounding contingency and defeating the Hegelianism that persisted within Marxism, helped replace the teleology inherent to even the dialectical materialism he had championed just a decade earlier.

Of all his contemporaries, and even of predecessors such as Sartre, Althusser is perhaps the one most associated with a paralyzing Franco-centrism that absolutely failed to account for important political, historical, and aesthetic developments in the Third World. Such narratives, however, are less true than they appear. For one thing, many intellectuals in Latin America apparently did not share this view. Althusser's texts became standard references for intellectual debates across Latin America. His work reached Cuba, in particular, as early as 1966 thanks to the journal *Casa de las Américas* and would become a valuable intellectual resource for "breaking with orthodox Soviet forms that loomed over the development of Cuban Marxism."<sup>31</sup> In Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, Althusser's work was so widely translated and debated that one or more so-called Althusserian schools of thought emerged, often identified with one intellectual figure, such as Marta Harnecker in Chile or Emilio de Ípola in Argentina.<sup>32</sup>

What follows are translations into English for the first time of his

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31 Ortega Reyna, "Incendiar el océano," 133.

32 Ibid., 136.

two essays on the Cuban artists Roberto Álvarez Ríos (“A Young Cuban Painter before Surrealism: Alvarès Ríos”) and Wifredo Lam (“Lam”). These constitute a small attempt to complicate such absolute narratives and arguments, while acknowledging Althusser’s own perplexing and often ambiguous relationships with their subjects. For instance, did Althusser only encounter Álvarez Ríos and Lam because he frequented his friend’s art gallery, was invited to particular dinners, or received a petition from one of them via post? Though this may very well be the case, we will likely never know.

But narratives are never so simple. While it was certainly true, for example, that Althusser held the party line of the PCF against his own Maoist students, who had found a reservoir of revolutionary thought in contemporary China, it was also true that he participated, alongside the curator Pierre Gaudibert, in the promotion and discussion of Third World artists. Wilson has even asserted that he maintained an ongoing correspondence with Álvarez Ríos.<sup>33</sup> Throughout his writings on art, including the essays on Leonardo Cremonini and Lucio Fanti, it is clear that Althusser’s concerns about contemporary developments in the Third World pervaded his thought, although they might not have pervaded other subjects of his writing.<sup>34</sup> As Lowery Stokes Sims has argued, “European and Euro-American artists exercised a proprietary ownership of the primitive, thus by implication accommodating the power relationships inherent in colonialism.”<sup>35</sup> Althusser’s essays on Álvarez Ríos and Lam, though they sometimes trafficked in primitivism, were an attempt to upend this continuation of a colonial relation. Perhaps the most important way in which Althusser did this was to skew the relation between himself and his subjects unequally toward his subjects. Unlike other philosophers, who wrote on very minor artists, Althusser broke the mold by writing about Wifredo Lam. In 1977, Lam’s celebrity dwarfed Althusser’s by a wide margin; despite Althusser’s influence in Continental philosophy and Marxism, this disparity largely holds true today.

For many readers, what these two essays will offer, above all, is a

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33 Wilson, *Visual World*, 222.

34 Sarah Wilson has pointed to Althusser’s engagement with the Algerian war by way of Cremonini’s images of torture there, as well as with the revelations of the gulag in the USSR by way of Fanti’s allusions to Moscow conceptualism. See Wilson, *Visual World*, 40–63 and 99–125.

35 Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam*, 2.

snapshot of two key shifts in Althusser's thought—the first during the early 1960s, from Hegelian Marxism to structural Marxism; the second during the late 1970s, from structural Marxism to the “materialism of the encounter” or “aleatory materialism.” These snapshots capture reflections from Althusser on Lacanian psychoanalysis, the nature of language, and the unfolding of history, among other subjects. But hopefully the translation of these essays will also present scholars with an opportunity to build on the work of writers such as Sarah Wilson in order to reconsider the marginalized role of the visual arts within French Marxism and so-called French Theory more generally.