How did contemporary art and its discourse arrive at a moment in which the art object has gone from being conceived of as an inert, autonomous object to a material reality exhibiting its own agency? Immanent Vitalities: Meaning and Materiality in Modern and Contemporary Art responds to this question by turning to a range of artistic practices that developed in Venezuela and Brazil. I investigate these practices, along with the artists’ connections to Europe, to chart specific cases of global modern and contemporary art that engage changing conceptions of materiality, whereby artists disavow the conceptual constraints that claim matter as inert substance, that place the inorganic in opposition to the organic, and that position human subjectivity in opposition to things. With the term immanent vitality I invoke concepts key to the new materialisms that have emerged since the early 2000s in order to account for how the artistic works presented in these pages break with dualisms such as mind-matter and culture-nature. Consequently, this study also advances how art, as a material object and material practice, serves as a fitting model for thinking through the entanglements of materiality and subjectivity.
Immanent Vitalities does not presume to provide a continuous genealogy from global modern to contemporary art. In each chapter I focus on a representative case of artistic production in which an artist seems to begin his or her work by asking what art, as a material object and practice, can do (rather than exclusively asking what art is). One inspiration for this book is Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro’s 2006 conference on modern and contemporary art from Latin America, which he organized on the occasion of the new Blanton Museum of Art’s opening. The event was notable for bringing together leading professionals in the field—artists, curators, and academics. More than a decade later, I vividly recall the moment when Waltercio Caldas pulled a piece of plastic out of his pocket, setting it on the table next to himself and Gabriel during their public conversation. Suddenly the plastic began to shift, its creases unraveled, and its semiopacity became increasingly translucent. The material came alive before the public’s eyes. I do not remember what Caldas was responding to at that specific moment, but I imagine, given his unique mode of presentation, that he was doubling down—with his characteristic elegance married to his craftiness in staging this visual surprise—on how materiality impinges on artistic representation as well as on art’s perception. Here materiality trumped verbal discourse on art, and since then the “magic” of the material that he pulled out of his pocket has lived on in my thinking, such that this scene has unwittingly served as a point of departure for some of the concerns articulated in these pages.

The emergence in the last decade and a half of modern and contemporary Latin American art as a unique field of study in the United States has helped give academic recognition to the region’s art, but it has also had the effect of suggesting to some that it constitutes a wholly separate history, largely driven by geography. As I insist throughout this volume, the modern art of Latin America has always been entangled with the modernisms of Europe and North America. The artists in this study all experienced migration in some form or another, and they often produced work in regions traditionally associated with the “West” in the Global North. (Furthermore, artists and intellectuals from Latin America often see themselves as part of the “West,” even when they are time and again excluded from it by the perspective of many scholars in the United States and Europe.) Thus, although I champion the current visibility of the region’s art, I continually worry about (and find myself fighting against) its intellectual ghettoization as a specialization. I am equally concerned about how contemporary artists from the region, in a paradoxical fashion, seem at times compelled to leverage their cultural identity as a marker of their “globality,” which often has the unintended effect of bolstering nativist assumptions that naturalize identities.
When people ask about the genesis of *Immanent Vitalities*, I am reminded of Gego’s musings (“If people ask”) on the question of the origins of her own work. In her response, which serves as one of the epigraphs to this volume, she questions whether anecdotes and personal memories, her origins and specific path, would add anything to an understanding of her work. She ultimately leaves it to scholars to provide an initial answer, but she also recognizes the complexity of an individual’s life story. The present volume is the culmination of my long-standing investment in the art of Latin America, an elaboration of intellectual interests that extend to my undergraduate years. I completed a bachelor’s degree in comparative area studies at Duke University, choosing Latin America as my primary region and western Europe as my secondary region. My first publication in art history, written while I was still an undergraduate in 1995, was on the performance work of Ana Mendieta. Researching her practice became a way for me to explore a migrant experience through art (I am the daughter of a Cuban immigrant and a Cuban exile) and to begin to claim art history as an academic discipline to which I could belong. When I entered graduate school in art history (initially at Yale and later at Princeton), art critics from Latin America such as Mário Pedrosa, Marta Traba, and Gerardo Mosquera were familiar to me, while critics of the Anglo-American tradition were decidedly not. (I recall thinking, *Who is this Clement Greenberg everyone is talking about?* and feeling utterly mortified that I did not know.) US academic interest in the modern art of Latin America was then not what it is today, when global art history reigns as a dominant paradigm within the discipline (though in the 1980s Anglo museums and curators did exhibit the region’s art and played a pioneering role in driving the eventual rise of an academic field).

Alongside my graduate studies of Euro-American art, I began publishing articles on major figures of twentieth-century art in Latin America, including Gego and Cildo Meireles. I experienced these intellectual engagements not as antithetical or discrete realms of knowledge but as part of modern and contemporary art more broadly conceived (today one might qualify such a perspective as “global”). Because modern art in Latin America was not taught in the graduate programs I attended, I designed a syllabus on the region’s conceptualist practices for an independent study with Dr. Kellie Jones, for whom I later worked as a research assistant, producing an annotated bibliography on art in Latin America from independence to the present. Such work commingled with my research on Euro-American art and provided further evidence of the connections that existed in the visual arts among cultures that did not grow up separately from one another but were always already intertwined through colonial histories, cultural policies, and migrations. For my dissertation I sought to move beyond the mainstream narrative
of America’s postwar triumph and chose to focus on art in France, whose postwar movements were also understudied but seemed a likelier fit with the state of modernist studies in art history. Since then, I have published two books on the subject: The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme: Art and the Performative in Postwar France (2013) and Off-Screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-Garde (2015).

While understated in this volume, my earlier theoretical concerns are further developed in these pages. In The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme, I addressed the 1950s and the Paris-based artists known as the nouveaux réalistes. These artists developed a new mode of realist signification that I maintained was a performative one, whereby the problematic the artists’ work engaged was one of social meanings, not referential truths. Where The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme was informed by theories of linguistic performativity, the present volume evokes theorizations of material performativity that emerged in the 1980s and are often cited as the “origin” for the new materialisms. Whereas the prior work tracked how artists took as their material the discursive acts that name, interpolate, and describe, my conceptualization of “immanent vitality” turns to the liveliness internal to matter and to how matter comes to hold significance (to matter) as part of a dynamic process in which distinctions, such as between the human and nonhuman, are not given but continually reconfigured and (performatively) produced. Notwithstanding the theoretical divergences and geographic discontinuities between the two works, what they nevertheless share as art history is an attention to that which breaks with theories of representation both artistic and philosophical.

My prior research subjects also make intermittent appearances in these pages. Kinetic art, which I initially engaged on account of nouveau réaliste Jean Tinguely, is here addressed in the work of artists from Venezuela who also worked in Paris. In the Venezuelan context, arte cinético (kinetic art) is often used loosely to bring together various artists, from Alejandro Otero to Gego. In contrast to their fellow artists and friends on the international scene like Alexander Calder and Tinguely, Jesús Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez primarily created virtual movement in their work, producing what Luis Pérez Oramas fittingly describes as an “optical caress.” On account of the alternative psychotherapy he proposed, Lettrist Isidore Isou is an important reference in my chapter on Lygia Clark. The two artists overlapped in Paris in the late 1960s and early 1970s at a moment when psychiatry was coming under increasing scrutiny. In the critical literature, Clark’s therapeutic work is often addressed in isolation rather than as part of a broader international network of artists, filmmakers, and psychiatrists who called for psychiatric reform in the 1960s and ’70s. This chapter also broadens the scope of my research in