

THE MISUNDER- STANDING BETWEEN THE POET AND THE THEOLOGIAN

NICOLÁS GUAGNINI

Let us consider the following seven phrases:

“We will not serve nature.”

“The objective world offers us elements which we convert systematically into a subjective world, thus returning them to the objective world in the form of new facts.”

“Aesthetics legitimizes the judgments which our intuition makes about art with arguments constructed *a posteriori*.”

“Let us appreciate blacks who are really black, and whites who are really white.”

“We are the primitive people of a new era. Let us suppress ideas and other paralyzes.”

“A single image surpasses or condenses what a dense treatise can tell the intellect.”

“Our America, especially in view of the Yankee failure, is humanity’s only hope.”

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These declarations, some of them general and therefore vague, others quite precise, compose a manifesto, almost a creed. Their anti-imperialist tone and their position in regards to racial matters seem to situate our incipient program in the environs of May 1968. The pocket diatribe against nature and the call for the creation of a new objectivity are clearly of concretist or neo-concretist roots. Perhaps, then, our little prescriptive manual dates back to the late 1940s, or to the following decade? The appeal to intuition and the confidence in the power of the communicative language of the image have “surrealist” roots. One might then deduce that our text is from the end of the 1920s or the beginning of the ‘30s. Almost instinctively, out of regionalist habit, we situate the movement that gave rise to this manifesto on the eastern coast of South America. Its works are probably not very large in scale, white and black with a bit of colour, frequently red or light blue. The best examples are in the Cisneros Collection, in the Museum of Latin American Art in Buenos Aires (MALBA), or in Texas. Or perhaps its creators

are still treasuring yellowing papers, photos, and original publications, anxiously awaiting the call from the Tate or the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) which will finally pull them out of their existence in the middle of the middle class and propel them into the upper middle class and into History with a capital H.

The truth is that the above sentences are literal quotations, or my own free paraphrases with minimal alterations, of fragments of works by Vicente Huidobro, Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Mario de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade, Arturo Uslar Pietri, José Vasconcelos, José Carlos Mariátegui, and Leopoldo Lugones. They were written between 1914 and 1931. Naturally, they come from texts of manifests linked to Ultraism, *martifierrismo*, the poetry of the Pau-Brasil movement, Anthropophagism, and other literary vanguards. I disavow any attempt at accuracy. To provide exact references as to place, form, and time of publication would be counterproductive for my argument.

This little collage, this continental *exquisite corpse*, this mutual *détournement* of textual monuments, has but one objective: to prove that the model for the visual arts--in fact for all of the arts--which has been developed in Latin America is fundamentally a literary one. Furthermore, it is a model based on poetic avant-gardes, because it was constructed at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, at a time when poetry was still the great political and ideological theatre where “identitary” questions were settled.

Accepting as given the previous argument--whose demonstration would require examples¹--we find ourselves in a violently melancholy position. If poetry is the model, and if the figure of the poet as the great demiurge who generates ideological and aesthetic markets has disappeared (having finally been replaced, in the past two decades, by that of the architect), we are then faced with an art whose decoding depends on a kind of knowledge which has become extinct.

This predicament is aggravated by an issue of cultural geopolitics. As objects flow from South to North, and as various institutions in the US

and Europe purchase them, at prices that are laughable in comparison with those received for works by artists of the period between 1940 and 1970 who belong to a central culture, (but still high enough to divorce the works from their local markets), the discourses which guarantee their legibility don't necessarily travel along with the works. There exist two dominant positions guiding the display of these productions: a contextual model based on geography, which is historicist and tends to protect aspects of the original discourses; and the formal and "isomorphic" one, which looks for visual or structural analogies (or both). Naturally there are hybrids, and the criteria of each model migrate towards the other with results that are sometimes happy and sometimes not. In the best of cases, where the historicist model dominates, the contextual facts are preserved. But then we arrive at the moment of interpretation and find ourselves amid the academic structure of the West, permeated by the powerful scaffolding constructed by *October* magazine around structuralism, the Frankfurt School (particularly Adorno), and a sanitized version of Bataille –a Bataille without Sade— which has produced misunderstandings.

It's a sad example of the road to hell being paved with good intentions. The problem is that this other knowledge, the knowledge about the theoretical models of the Latin American literary avant-garde, which of course runs through the open veins of North American academia as well, is compartmentalized within another discipline, one which has no contact with the field of art history.

In the United States it's a political matter. Latin Americans are the largest minority and they sway elections in Florida, California, and Texas, states that can wind up determining even the outcome of presidential elections as a result of the absurd system of the Electoral College, perhaps the most significant flaw in the almost perfectly republican structure of the Constitution. The issue of political representation is amplified by the politically correct question of cultural representation. Paradoxes and absurdities multiply. The finest Brazilian art occupies the

storage facilities of a museum in Texas, a state whose overwhelmingly Mexican Hispanic population has never heard of neo-concretism, and whose life and cultural experience is as divorced from that of a *carioca* as it is from that of a New England patrician. In New York, the most populous groups are Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, followed by Ecuadorians and Mexicans. Of these groups, only the first two exert any form of rudimentary political organization. The art that is exhibited in the museums and that is shown in universities stems, in large part, from the eastern coast of South America, from Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay. All of these are countries without significant immigration to the United States in quantitative terms (in qualitative terms, it's a different story: Oiticica, Ricardo Piglia, Liliana Porter, Luis Camnitzer, Juan Downey, Reinaldo Laddaga and many other artists have spent crucial decades of their lives on the East Coast of North America). The past must either be modern or it won't exist at all. And the division of modernity into avant-garde and neo avant-garde, into pre- and post-war, while fully operative for the narrative of the transit from Paris to New York via Auschwitz, is completely useless when trying to understand, let's say, the passage of Lygia Clark from gestaltist abstraction to a model of subject and body therapy that lies beyond the realm of language —yet she has been included in anthologies and conceptual art exhibitions.

There is a second misunderstanding, of a purely political nature, restricted to the artistic productions of the late 1950s and after, one that is easier to remedy given that it refers to knowledge that is more “alive” and which has receded less on the epistemic horizon than the poetic literary debate. I am referring to the philosophical, theological, and ideological currents that informed revolutionary attempts against the global backdrop of the Cold War, the Condor plan, the interventionism of the CIA, and the ominous influence of Henry Kissinger. To enumerate those currents: Sartre's existentialism, crucial for the first and third Massotta and for Ferreira Gullar in formulating the theory of

the non-object; the *foquismo* of Regis Debray, heightened by the heroic figure of Che Guevara, and virtually a formula for generating artistic phenomena like Tucumán Arde; a peculiar reading of structuralism and of Roland Barthes finely minced with McLuhan and Borges, at the DiTella; the relentless shadow of the Liberation Theology of Boff and Gutiérrez and of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed in the awareness that the basic operation is the subversion of structures of power (the Church, education, or language) from within, an interventionist methodology that ranges from Cildo Meireles and Luis Camnitzer to Juan Downey.

Suspended between those losses and misunderstandings, we thus live a little.

We live on adversities. Epistemic adversities. We live. Misunderstood.

Harlem 2010

NB: This sketch is dedicated to José Falconi and to his coffee table, both of which were instrumental.

1 From Borges onwards, Argentine art has been modeled like a series of fictions. The modified piano of Xul Solar never sounded a note, the rules of the *panjogo* are volatile, just like the grammar and the vocabulary of the *panlingua*. They are not systems, but rather enunciations. The concrete artists and Madi brought to Paris an exhibition with several fictional artists, with photos for the catalogue and an apocryphal name included. The auto-generated historiography of the movement, filled with more lies than facts, makes fiction into its operative key. Finally, the "art of the media" proposes to replace the work of art by its representation in the mass media, in other words, a theorization of the social projection and the *raison d'être* of fiction.