

The Karma of Certain Things

Claudio Iglesias, "El karma de ciertas cosas",
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Lately Diego Bianchi, one of the Argentine artists who has best interpreted the centrality of the installation form in art in the last decade, has been veering towards sculpture. His concerns and themes remain the same, though: the karma and the reincarnation of contemporary objects, the astonishing way they go from being indispensable to being trash. Now, evoking certain yoga practices, he has turned the Centro Cultural Recoleta into a hall of darkness and torment where his sculptures and their shadows rise up after a radical ordeal that has taken them to the limit, and perhaps even a little beyond.

"Since 1973, when he decided to raise his right arm, Amar Bharti Baba has never again brought it down." The invitation to Ejercicios Espirituales, Diego Bianchi's exhibition at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, makes reference to the practices of the Ek-Bahu Babas, a special class of yogis whose feats include holding up an arm (usually the left one) for a period of twelve years or, if they are particularly enthusiastic like Amar Bharti Baba, forever. And though yoga is one of Bianchi's favorite things to do, the invitation hinted at something else: the fact that a radical gesture can partake of the sort of stubbornness necessary to hold up an arm for years, and that one of the means to that radicalness is atrophy and the fossilization of what was once alive. This invitation to a show of contemporary sculpture was most certainly tempting, especially considering that until recently Bianchi was one of the artists most bound to the procedures associated with hypersaturated installation that spread in Buenos Aires and the rest of the world in the 2000s at the hand of Thomas Hirschhorn, John Bock and others. This type of work is characterized by expansive display and a choral quality, as well as the interconnection of devices and the proliferation of information taken directly from social life and placed in the framework of the white cube, that is, neatly "cutting and pasting" trash, products, magazine clippings, etc. and putting them on gallery walls.

The passage from mechanisms of this sort to sculptures that stand on their own two feet and that evidence hours of work on the material is heralded, at the entrance to the show, by a figure in a meditative stance. Its torso and head, though, consist of only a burnt Styrofoam monolith out of which come two legs in lotus position. The many other figures in the gallery display the same juxtaposition of corporal emergency, contortionism and violence: a woman on a base with a column running through her and wrapped in rags á la Alberto Heredia; a pair of dislocated legs jumping against the wall; a jumble of limbs and orifices charred and spattered with paste or cement; mutilated figures in sweatpants; figures with prostheses in lycra leggings; hanging figures, and heads and mops of hair scattered on the floor or suspended from the ceiling by a system of ropes alongside wooden speakers and pieces of plastic chair. This is a show steeped in torment and darkness. At the opening, the bare arms of two dancers metaphorically separated from their bodies interacted with the holes in a wooden platform under the beams of two lights on timers that heightened the sense of suffocation and imbalance. The sparse and theatrical nature of the lighting that cast shadows of all the arms and legs and bits of wire and pointy things that come in and out of the sculptures contribute to this torture-chamber atmosphere. In this sense, Ejercicios Espirituales seems to take the best of both worlds – the world of sculpture and the world of installation – and put them at the service of an original project where the turn towards visual elaboration and a certain interest in the subjective sphere does not mean leaving the world behind for interiority, but just the opposite.

THE SEVEN LIVES OF MERCHANDISE

Even though Ejercicios Espirituales is quite different from his earlier productions, many of the most genuine concerns that Bianchi has explored over the years are present here as well, first and foremost among them the karma and reincarnation not of persons but of things. In installation like Imperialismo / Minimalismo (Imperialism / Minimalism, 2006), which addressed the piles of objects that circulate in contemporary society, Bianchi pursued formal tensions between the semiotic nature of merchandise (their ability to communicate through design, branding and marketing) and the trash that they inevitably become. Starting in 2007, Bianchi began focusing on methods for collecting material, centering on the relationships between industrial civilization, environment and nature. The question about what happens to things once they have been used lay the basis for the importance of trash as the material of his work. One example is the show From Deep Inside, held in the Luis Adelantado Gallery (Miami, 2007), where Bianchi filled the gallery up with the increasingly smelly remains of hamburger joints and other fast food products. In Wake Me Up When The Present Arrives, another project in Miami in 2007, this time at Locust Projects, he removed a motorboat and other objects that had been discarded from a trash dump near the exhibition space, generating a landscape highly critical of the area's cultural idiosyncrasy.

But, as he gradually focused more and more on the life-after-death of merchandise, Bianchi took distance from the operations undertaken within the art context and began muttering a sort of self-criticism. Wikipedia, the project selected for the arteBA-Petrobras prize in 2007, staged the repertoire of resources typically used in installations with found objects by means of a series

of signs that ironically indicated them: “repetition,” “variation,” “accidentalism,” “balancing act”, etc. The distancing from those procedures (which Bianchi calls the “rhetorical figures” of contemporary art) led him to a rediscovery of sculpture with some of the same formal and conceptual premises as installation but a broader sphere of action.

ALL LARVAS GO TO THE RIVER

“La Bièvre,” the story about the creek in Paris of the same name that Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote in 1898, could serve as the preface to Ejercicios Espirituales. Huysmans compares that crystalline stream born in the French countryside to an innocent girl from the provinces who arrives in the city, ends up in the slums and becomes the object of all sorts of torture and humiliation: lacerated by sewers and remains of tanneries, surrounded by trash dumps, full of piss and bowel, intubated and underground, the Bièvre loses its bright blond sheen and its jubilation to become a foul-smelling cloudy quagmire by the time it reaches the Seine, pouring into it the worst of civilization, like so many innocent girls who become the victims of the underworld, poverty and crime in the big city. Subjecting materials to all sorts of torture and bodies to countless contortions, Bianchi performs a similar operation by tying material destruction to violent fiction on the narrative plane. For an artist who is contented to buy or find a great many objects and place them in the exhibition space, the shift effected in torturing the material (burning chairs, cutting pieces of wood, gagging bodies, etc.) indicates a turn more heuristic than formal. Indeed, the redemption of sculpture serves to fill the hole where the operation of installing, literally, an object in the exhibition space no longer suffices: at the very least, it is necessary to shackle it and weld its most intimate parts.

If the logic underlying the installation (which has allowed theorists like Juliane Rebentisch and Boris Groys to call it the dominant language of the present) consists of taking a photograph of the state in which contemporary societies find themselves (by immobilizing on gallery walls a repertoire of objects that in society are in a constant state of motion), the shift to sculpture can be read as a turn towards the arc of subjective, unconscious and atavistic motivations that move persons, not things, in societies of this sort. Ejercicios Espirituales is, then, a show full of that cheapness, equidistant between realism and pornography, that in America is called pulp: jumbled bodies, lycra leggings, nudity, orifices, bulges, twisted irons... all elements that involve the exact dosage of sexual violence and psychological interest, and bring a sizable measure of reality to a delirious coven.

In this sense, Bianchi’s work partakes of the fictional formulations of many contemporary sculptors, like David Altmejd, Nathan Mabry and Mark Manders, who have also repositioned the most tormented strain of the human figure in current art. But Bianchi can be credited with rediscovering, before these interchangeable figures of the contemporary mainstream, the emblematic figure of Alberto Heredia to whose gagged and teathed wire monsters Bianchi makes direct reference. Heredia is not only the creator of rotten art and perhaps the most important Argentine sculptor of all times, but also an excellent conductor in an attempt to reopen the channels between visual sensibility and social reality. All of his work – and in this sense it lies on Berni’s shoulders – combines the iconoclastic and comic spirit of the post-avant-garde with a sense of realism broadened to the emotional and the psychological. The legendary box of camembert cheese that Heredia took to a gallery in 1963 seems to rot today with a new stench, and Bianchi’s exercises have a great deal of what Heredia, along with Huysmans, considered the central mission of the artist: “To study the larvas of society.”