

## The lightning bolt of ubiquity

*Modernization has given rise to four new spatial phenomena: the emergence of 'areas' and 'businesses' specially oriented toward those who stroll and consume, the 'house-world' (conceived of as something capable of providing all that is necessary for production, reproduction, recreation and consumption), the 'neighborhood-world' (conceived of as a refuge for a given social class), and the increasing importance of 'virtual public spaces' (telephone, radio, television, video, computer.)"*

*-Gustavo Remedi, La ciudad latinoamericana (The Latin American City)*

The city-image replaces figures with silhouettes; roadways with circuits; places with connections. It reduces the unexpected—or rather, integrates the unexpected into the advertising world's routines for delivering information. It is in this way that the city shields itself through a series of codified beliefs that keep it stable and obedient. By establishing fixed signals and permanent itineraries it manages to contain the disagreement that poses an eternal threat to the tranquility of consumerism, travel and work. All cities are forced to repeat themselves, to engage anew, day after day, in their errors and their logic, so that their subjects may inhabit something that is a known quantity and accept inequality without feeling distress or guilt.

What is the way to intersect the formal consensuses practiced among architecture, urbanism and economics? What are the aesthetic pauses that can reclaim those bodies eaten away by iconographic transactions and speed?

The visual regime of the city exists in a state of conflict with the fickle and resistant emergence of other languages and resorts to daily hygienic operations to clean the stain, the shadow, the trace that is useless. Nevertheless, there are images that create a jolt in the representation with anachronistic objects and diffuse texts that are capable of revealing the montages and the symptoms of the memory that are destroyed on the streets. What survives among them is a pale, ephemeral, stubborn light that the corporate surfaces and the technologies of modernization would like to destroy. Is public art the consecration of a metaphor in which power surrenders its territory to the monument or the political deconstruction of space?

The metropolis is a sleepless machine dedicated to the production of services and operated by global bureaucracies that monitor and supervise the economic populace. The communicational discourse is well-stocked with a variety of visual texts that grant and deny access and create unstable sovereignties of whimsy. The street, organized on the basis of tactics for submission, diversion or protest, elaborates small and intermittent imitations that become the material used for informational models, in which the most robust, visible name-brands control the language of the street. The citizen who has been stripped of a specific story entertains himself in those junctures of advertising that lend modernization that neutral, festive body with which the city assumes a kind of consensus that is exhibited as social cohesion, pacification, and ersatz community. That pretension of community, in any event, is

no longer exclusively sustained by nationalist, class-conscious, or ethnic ideologies, but rather to the contrary, by religious, athletic, community or citizens' security groups aimed at establishing brief, subsidiary solidarities that seek resonance and help in the media of communication.

Is public art a kind of mimesis hidden behind all that is contemporary? Where can we do with the inclemency of a sign when urban planning takes over all available space? What signifiers and poetics can overcome fiduciary trusts and real estate speculation?

As Gabriela Siracusano has noted, there are other tricks of the visual variety that allow us to see the otherness of the urban experience without falling prey to postcolonial melancholy. Juan Castillo acts upon the image of Santiago's transportation system and proposes an "anarchical" flow toward the interior of a network of vehicles that become mobile canvases for a series of portraits that obey no codes. Dismantling the conventions surrounding private and public life with the aesthetic sign transformed momentarily into a residual, other *passenger*, through a form of artistic expression that uses the popular as an anthropological experiment as well as a political excuse, is a trick of the gaze through which the portrait does not recognize the street that has been established by the power base and draws attention to a story based on a personal image. This is not a "d  j   vu" style homage to the most mercantile of the pictorial genres but rather an insubordination that alludes to its fall, to the loss of the face in the icon, to the absence of matter in the flesh, to the substitution of the landscape with the postcard. The journey that Juan Castillo proposes these images embark upon seeks to wound the ghostly quality of the productive, disciplined body, recalling the subject erased by the grid of roadways created by indolent urbanists and city planners. This is the moment when public art is able to break the circularity of the invisible and reveal how the transportation model equalizes all the destinations and reduces them to nothing more than schedules and supervision, making those bodies analogous to all those cargos of money, information and games, and distributing them throughout the city—with no flickering grace or illuminating swarms as Baudelaire would say—until fusing them into the architectural structure that is always ready and willing to eliminate blinks and filth. What is an urban space? What is public art? Without a doubt, globalization has forced us to rethink these problems. Today's urban ideologies justify economic centrality, political fragmentation and cultural diversity yet this newfangled multiculturalism only disguises inequalities and feigns symbolic gestures of tolerance aimed at gaining even greater control over images.

A key element of the work of Juan Castillo has been that *gap* that his pieces establish between the unequal and different, by creating a space for the oblique and the transversal—in other words, he intersects his material with discourse but without losing the diversity that pervades it, and he turns the contingency of shelter into a device for using the technical and gestural as political writings of a previously intimated subjectivity bereft of any essentialness or exoticism.

Concepts like neighborhood, bus stop, spectator, picture appear without spectacle and in transit, seeking no theoretical objective. They are not hermeneutic utensils for justifying the effects of the piece: they are there and they allow ephemeral dialogues and signs of multiple meanings for they confirm the hybrid connection between street and art, in the face of so much empty speculation about the notion of city. If public art has any meaning at all, in spite

of the tremendous impact it made over a decade ago when it first emerged on the art scene, it is not because it suggests a new political space (as Félix Duque suggests) but because of the question it raises regarding the political efficacy of the aesthetic gesture when it also serves as an urbanistic ornament. If public art is interested in tightening these new technologizations and putting them to use in different ways, then neither the specific sites nor the relational aesthetics are enough to lend habitability a silent, defiant will. Public spaces reduced to slogans and theater serve as a moral patrimony for various different institutions that attempt to regulate life by forcibly leaving the mark of their repression, supply, vice or controlled success on the everyday experience. What is the written contract that unites politics and city? Where do we find those rebellious zones that allow us to identify social differences unconsumed by the influence of the spoken word? If we interpret these questions from the perspective of the artistic documents created by Juan Castillo, we see the signs converge, crashing against one another, breaking apart at the very instant at which they try to reconstruct –without any romantic pretensions- the relationship between landscape and subject and then at the same time we suddenly find ourselves facing a body comprised of visual scraps, threads of meaning and liquid memories interrupting the commercial light display with faces that bear neither economy nor pedigree.

The traveling portraits of *Minimal-Barroco* preclude the consecration of the object: all they do is identify a dark space and then they disappear, according to Ery Cámara, like lightning bolts of ubiquity that infiltrate the concrete jungle of urban existence. Corporate luminosity with its billboards of pleasure and obedience celebrate the changes that the city has undergone beneath the mandate of virtual financial princes. The possibility of the collective is reduced to a model of public existence that resists any and all kinds of totality, and sometimes only lives off of the romantic signifier or its moments of fury and chaos. There where the maps come apart, Juan Castillo places in bits and pieces, without any neat seams, a series of images of people who give back their image with no documentary, biographical or literary pretensions. In this way the aesthetic operation substitutes the referent-portrait with the place-language and recognizes routes of affection and conversation, despite the fact of a visual culture of familiar scenes that continue to play themselves out. These unstable settings are intersected by images of individuals without an auratic text and place pressure upon the modes of negotiation of identity. Juan Castillo designs visual anagrams that lend attention to bodies that cannot be reduced to their visual paralysis.

Modernization multiplies the practices of desire and the legends of capitalism, underscoring a world of information and technology that acts between the folds of subjectivity, while delivering bellicose attacks to those who disobey its narcissistic illusion. In its inner recesses, art is once again reclaimed as a symbolic ornament by a globalized middle class; the aestheticization of the everyday emerges as the triumph of the market over the avant-garde and the history of art discovers its positivist failure, becoming an objectless discourse. Attempts are made to discipline the other and to make that difference a necessary informative exoticism capable of characterizing the age as a tolerant one. In this way, what is proposed might be called a *hierarchical pluralism* –an impressive oxymoron of the neo-liberal democracies, in which all things have the opportunity to be remembered by the hegemonic discourse, according to their position in the dictionary of conformity. If life is becoming something entirely virtual and its patrimony is becoming immaterial, is the artistic exercise, its political fissure, tantamount to the replacement of the significant materiality that erases

capital? Might we say that Juan Castillo's errant portraits that spiritually unite various cities around the world, are an attempt to recover the political gravity of certain images in the face of a cynical scenario that, according to J. Rebenisch, offers up the same representations over and over again?

As we cross through the marquee in which it is occasionally possible to see everything with profane enthusiasm, there is an 'after' effect of the image that awaits other meanings. To question the urban journey with images and place in the gaze's most desolate regions a collection of incomplete, whimsical portraits, the movement of which is the consequence of a fracture, makes Juan Castillo's work an exercise on migration and difference. Instead of a multicultural jubilee, it is the articulation of that *Latin American Frankenstein* made up of migrants and cultures displaced and altered by communication, art and the politics that bring together the matter, the sense and the subjectivity to crystallize, yet again, the age-old desire to illuminate the body and set the image aflame.