

**Al Calor del Pensamiento (In the Heat of Thought), Santander Bank
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The exhibition *Al Calor del Pensamiento*, containing works from the Daros Latinamerica Collection, exposed the European public to the hybridism of artistic production on the other side of the Atlantic. In the show, at the Santander Bank Foundation in Madrid, the Swiss curator Katrin Steffen made use of the metaphor in the exhibition's title to demonstrate how Latin American artistic production can be highly conceptual, whilst at the same time provoking a certain aesthetic of the senses. In order to juxtapose these two aspects of contemporary art, over seventy works by twenty-two artists from various Latin American countries were selected for the exhibition, in which works by the Brazilians Cildo Meireles and José Damasceno stood out.

In Europe, it is common to find an almost systematic division in the treatment of Latin American art. The interpretation and understanding of art from the region is divided into two distinct categories. The first is the label Latin American Conceptualism that, as distinct from European or North American manifestations, had a more political trajectory. The second, more generic label, involves the sensorial; in art this label relies on its visual impact, such as optical art and figurative Latino surrealism, or the sensorial is supported by trust in corporal engagement as it is felt in the work, for instance work by Lygia Clark. The belief that the work of art can carry the ambivalence of these two attributes unsettles the rigidity of European thought; in the exhibition rooms of the Santander Bank Foundation in Madrid, *Al Calor del Pensamiento*, from February to April 2010, revealed the plural nature of Latin American art.

A good example of work that defies these predefined structures are those of the Rio-based artist José Damasceno. The artist explores materials as the substance of thought. His installations introduce sculptural scenarios that entice the viewer. In Madrid, *O Presságio Seguinte (experiência sobre a visibilidade de uma substância dinâmica)*, *The Following Omen (experiment about the visibility of a dynamic substance)*, 1997, strategically positioned on the second floor of the gallery, attracts visitors to the spectacle of a body suspended in the air. The anonymous body, represented by a commonplace suit, is suspended by ropes that pass through it which are fixed to either side of the back of the gallery. The ropes hoist and support the figure, which rests at the visitor's eye level, like an old levitation trick in an illusionist show. However, in the work of Damasceno the ropes that suspend the body are visible, it being the person that has disappeared. The human figure of *The Following Omen* is hollow, the tension of the ropes maintains its presence, but doesn't complete its identity. Each element of the installation – the rope, jacket and trousers – have their significance expanded, they are questioned either in terms of their function or their physicality.

Next to Damasceno's *The Following Omen* was one of Cildo Meireles' most subtle creations, *Razão/Loucura (Reason/Madness)*, 1977. The work consists of two curved bamboo sticks which create two separate semicircles, one beside the other. Secured by a padlock, two metal chains connect each point of the bamboo sticks, forming a perimeter for each arc. In the middle of the curvatures, hanging down towards the padlock, there is also a key hanging from another chain. However, in the first bamboo structure the key does not reach the padlock. In the second semicircle the chain is too long and surpasses it. The simultaneous vision of the two bamboo structures has the effect of transposing the spectator to a future time, an action that is implicit in the experience of the work, but that only comes about in the speculation of the observer. What would happen if the key was to fit and we could open the lock? The span of the bamboo sticks is only possible with the secured padlock that produces a tension between the two points. To release the chains would dismantle the work. Nevertheless, their release would allow something unexpected to be seen and the bamboo would return to its original form. The work's ambiguity doesn't reside only in its title, but in the astute manner in which Meireles accesses the thought. The work is a metonym for a state of consciousness. The minimal gesture that defines the frontier between logic and delirium is intrinsic to the perception of the work.

The works of Damasceno and Meireles introduce a discourse that analyses the human condition, the capacity for knowing oneself and external reality. For this reason, we can assert that both *The Following Omen* and *Reason/Madness* contain a political character, being that Meireles' work, dating from 1977, refers also to the historical context of the military dictatorship in Brazil. Damasceno utilises a clear representation of the human figure in his work while Meireles takes advantage of common objects to create indexes of humanity. Although the viewer may experience an aesthetic impulse to contemplate the works' careful combination of materials, they both go beyond what Duchamp called 'retinal art', that is, an artistic manifestation that functions more through its visual stimulus than its cognitive provocations. Both works produce a reflection, a kind of thought, that doesn't rely upon a sensorial impression. But also, if on the other hand, conceptual art would denote the prerogative of the idea over the artistic object, or as the North American critic Lucy Lippard put it, 'the dematerialisation of the art object', how is it possible to speak of physical dematerialisation when the artwork reveals itself so clearly? The two artists, not only in these works, but throughout their trajectories, demonstrate a production characterised by the harmonious co-existence of sensorial seduction and cerebral provocation. This attribute is not exclusively Brazilian. If one day we should wish to define what is generically called Latin American art, this ambiguity would have to be cited. This characteristic was made the defining theme of the exhibition of the Daros Latinamerica collection in Madrid.

Al Calor del Pensamiento

The show was named after the eponymous work by the Chilean artist Gonzalo Díaz. The work consists of a German phrase, the English translation of which would be: 'We look for the unconditional everywhere and find only things'. The quote is written in metal and ceramic letters, electrically heated,

which raise the temperature of the environment, and that of whoever approaches the luminous red lettering. Díaz makes the public 'feel' the idea that is expressed. The Chilean's combination of the sensorial and the highly cerebral was a perfect metaphor for the selection of the Daros collection works. It was also true for the Colombian Oscar Muñoz, whose work requires the heat of the public as an essential element for its completion.

In *Aliento (Breath)*, 1996-2002, Muñoz invites people to look at themselves in a mirror. Seven circular steel discs mounted upon the wall allow the visitor to see their own reflection. However, on approaching the discs, the heat of their respiration makes someone's image – a man, woman or child – appear on the highly polished surface, which quickly disappears. The portraits are photos that the artist collected from obituaries or information about missing people, *desaparecidos*, in the Colombian newspapers. The air that someone exhales becomes the image of people who are already gone. Instead of the reflection of themselves, what the viewer sees are the victims of violence in the artist's country. With a poetic but tragic approach, Muñoz shares the shock of this loss with the public using a fading illustration.

Just as Muñoz invites the public's participation, so too does the Argentine Leandro Erlich. While Muñoz exposes a harsh reality, Erlich makes manifest the absurd. The artist leads the visitor to a dark room where three closed doors are visible, a bright light being emitted from behind each doorway and through the lock. In *Las Puertas (The Doors)*, 2004, the visitor can either retreat or decided to open one of the doors. The expectation of entering an illuminated space remains unfulfilled. On opening the door the lights turn themselves off and we are returned again to the exhibition. The request of an action from the public is also frequent in other works in the exhibition such as *Para Arrugar y Tirar (To be Wrinkled and Thrown Away)*, 1969, by Liliana Porter, who has made a paper sculpture requiring visitors to tear off sheets of paper from pads mounted on the wall. The Argentine artist who lives in New York is one of those who have been given a special room in Al Calor del Pensamiento, that also dedicated spaces to the Argentine León Ferrari, the Cuban group Los Carpinteros and the Mexican Carlos Amorales. The exhibition also included works of historical names such as Argentine Julio Le Parc and Martha Minujín, the Cuban Belkis Ayón, another Brazilian, Vik Muniz, and the Colombian artists Doris Salcedo, Oswaldo Macià José Alejandro Restrepo and Miguel Ángel Rojas. Discussing issues pertinent to Latin America contemporary art, the curatorial project strengthened the dialogue between the artworks presented and emphasized the hybridism that makes Latin American art unique but not restricted to any particular territory.

Translated by Zanna Gilbert