

Refusing salvation

By Dorothee Dupuis

Dorothee Dupuis, Adriana Minoliti and Eduardo Basualdo discuss art's ability to encapsulate the metaphysics of our time—in spite of not being able to save the world.

Argentine artists Eduardo Basualdo and Adriana Minoliti studied together a decade ago in Buenos Aires. Today their artistic practices have taken different philosophical paths at the same time they share conceptual interests. Dorothee Dupuis spoke with the artists about art's capacity to encapsulate the metaphysics of our times—even as it cannot save the world.

Dorothee Dupuis: In your work as an artist you use quite ancient cultural symbols related to Catholicism and its mythology. Doves, knives, markings, cages, fire: all are motifs that come into the mix in your often quite theatrical installations and sculptures, in which you take the position of demiurge. I've also read you came to art after a previous career as a puppeteer. You say you use ancient symbols to generate a new discourse. In a contemporary society undergoing such enormous technological changes as ours, how do you think these symbols can mean something in terms of present-day experience?

Eduardo Basualdo: My work investigates the human condition, people, and us as individuals in natural and social surroundings; it explores us as a territory where a physical and a mental nature coexist with some difficulty. These sorts of conflicts haven't changed much, despite technological advances. I think humankind's mysteries continue to be the same that they've been since the beginning of time. I work at a level of consciousness where technology hasn't generated that many changes.

It's true a lot of the symbols that appear in my work can also be found in religion or mythology, which in part I attribute to the fact that religion in contemporary Western societies works as a sort of unconscious symbolic reserve for approaching spirituality. That said, I don't look for my images in the religious or the mythological realms; I look for them in everyday life. Observing day-to-day life through symbolic code is one of the best possible exercises; it lets you discover how things work. You see phenomena unfold in real-time. That was the perspective from which I came to theatre. I was attracted by the idea of working in the present moment. Theatre's "here-and-now" was a great inspiration to me. Now in a certain way I conceive of installations as stage sets where audiences make their way through the space as if they were reading a musical score.

DD: In recent years, the development of the figure of the artist as researcher appears, paradoxically, to undermine the artist's authority, suggesting that the practice of art is more of a backup to research in other disciplines than an autonomous expression. You told me in your case, you were interested in what I just mentioned: more than a liberating, historical or social discourse you're trying to develop a more personal one. In this edition of Terremoto we discuss various artists for whom it has been important to adopt a clear position with regard to reality; to in some way function as spokespeople. I'm thinking particularly of Siqueiros in Daniel Garza's essay. Do you believe art, perhaps cultural production in general, can give rise to shared values in secular societies, despite major gender-, race- and class-related differences between individuals in an ever-more-globalized world? Do you think secular culture in its wide sense can realistically replace the sort of moral compass that religion has historically constituted? How do you see yourself as an artist amid these positions?

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EB: I think as artists we undertake tangential investigations. We don't back up others' research; it's more like we cross paths at certain points. Naturally we're exposed to theories and at the same time we think deeply about all kinds of knowledge. What I meant to say when we talked was that I recognize myself less as an artist who establishes his field of study and works at perfecting it, and more as one who doesn't know what his themes are and goes along discovering them as he moves forward. I don't work with any set research program, as might a scientist and as other artists do; I correct my course as I go. It's true that as the years pass, your conceptual ideas gradually get clearer and formal affinities may even crystallize, but that's the outcome of experience and not of some previous decision. My work adopts a strong position when it comes to reality—it questions it. A recurring principle in my work is distrust of what we call reality. I use my artworks to reveal physical and mental conditions in which we find ourselves submerged and they help me understand reality better. In a context like that, it would be absurd to start off with strict assumptions about what reality means.

The expression you just used to refer to certain artworks that serve as "spokespeople" for artists is interesting. I'd like my work to pour out in a pre-linguistic, guttural state. I do believe that I, as an artist and a citizen, can adopt a clear political position. But I'm not interested in using my art as a tool for doing that.

I think artistic activity in itself is a cogent expression of the subjectivity and heterogeneity that are absolutely essential to all societies. It's definitely a better replacement than religion, in that it positions the how we are before the how we should be and rescues the individual. At the same time, art is framed by a consumption and publicity structure that's no different from other social institutions. Therefore art as institution is not particularly progressive. It's built on the same paradigm that organizes the world: power and lucre. The same colonialist policies that work in other areas are deployed from art institutions. History is written in power centers and everyone else is a guest. I don't believe artworks are going to change institutions. I think that task is for people. In any case, artworks constantly strive toward expanding consciousness, putting a twist on conflicts or searching for new perspectives. They can serve as mental maps or utopian exercises that stimulate and recreate visions of the world, but in a reality as physical as the one we live in, our bodies effect the changes.

DD: Adriana, Eduardo says that as far as he's concerned, technology hasn't greatly changed our ways of being. What's your take on that given you so often work with the notion of technology?

Adriana Minoliti: First of all, I don't know if technology can be reduced to something that does not modify human beings. You can neither "essentialize" technology nor humans. Lots of people have no access to a lot of modern-day technologies and one technology isn't used the same way, doesn't have the same impact, in Buenos Aires as it does in Japan. Somehow you've got to apply it to something to come up with a more concrete discussion. Let's consider how beginning in the 1950s certain medical technologies start to mutilate infants in accord with "human" genital normalization. Or how technologies affect people who aren't "normal."

DD: Eduardo believes in a universal spectator and thinks his art can create a generalized impact irrespective of that viewer's class, gender, age or race. It seems like you're interested in thinking as much about the nature of your production as you are about your audience. In other words, you situate your practice as affiliated with certain theories, such as trans-feminism, post-humanism and the idea of the post-human, in counterpoint to a system of white Western males. I get the impression there's a lot of disinformation and misunderstanding out there when it comes to these

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intellectual tendencies.

AM: I don't believe there's a universal spectator. What kind of clothes does the universal spectator wear? For me that sounds all but totalizing. I believe many of us imagine ourselves ideal viewers of certain artworks, imaginary characters with whom we establish fantasies. I never trusted the emitter, the message or the receiver; it smacks of some monogamy contract. I'm more interested in a relationship of "polyamorous communication". Coming up with some generalized recipient strikes me as fiction. My artworks emerge from the fact that difference and dissidence are not negatives; they are esteemed and recognized. On the other hand, I wonder if a universal spectator implies some truth, some essence, in the style of the avant-garde. Who then carries the universal-art baton that corresponds to such a spectator? Artworks have infinite scope. They slip through our fingers and everyone "gets" them however they can.

DD: Could you talk about some recent projects that make the key strategies of your practice visible?

AM: On my last project in Puerto Rico, there were two groupings of different pieces but they had the same color palette. One work was about the paradox of Queer Modulor and the other was ten houses for cats. Two series that contemplated modern architecture, with square modules and cubes. On one hand, the cats' houses take up an amusing or tender retro-toy aesthetic that critiques architectural and urbanist anthropocentrism from an animalistic perspective; like Queer Modulor, it is a series of geometric paintings that include sexed-up figures lacking morphology or defined anatomy. It creates a parody of the 180-centimeter-tall European man's sacralization as the ideal size for designing everything that surrounds us.

I believe humor is an important tool. When you address an issue, it seems key to me that you can generate a smile in terms of reflection. I also think it's a strategy to talk about certain issues that give rise to prejudices and that get overlooked in art and politics, like animal rights. Tenderness and kindness are a back door in. I don't know if they're politically effective in a traditional, pamphleteering sense; I don't think anything in contemporary art is going to stir up an immediate revolution. But you can create "micro-agencies" that sow doubt or work their way into certain issues in certain places where they normally don't get a hearing. It's weird. It's not about trying to make sure someone else understands a message, nor should we insist on how a work ought to be received. I can come up with a metaphor, a joke, a party, an argument, a context, a para-text, a context .but in the end, I don't know what the other person's reaction is, even in the best of faith. But I can do experiments. A house for cats is an experiment to talk about architecture and discuss issues in another way. There's a far too long tradition of "discovering" the body's dimensions, starting with da Vinci; the modulor is the modern version of that masculine story, by serious, rational men. So the counterpoint—in the house for cats, in a style we relate to the infantile—can be an emotionally accessible reflection. My teacher Diana Aisenberg always says she tries to "pass on some happiness" through her artworks.

DD: Above all, Eduardo's work is metaphysical. He says he's not looking to it for social transformation. He also says it comes from personal disquiets. For Eduardo, making art is like establishing a shared monologue. How transformative is art's role in the world to you?

AM: Mine is a sexy metaphysics for thinking about another dimension, another universe. As it happens I'm super pessimistic. I don't believe that humanity as an organism can reach a full, equitable evolution. I don't believe there can stop being humanity, i.e., you can't stop the rest of the planet's subjection to our whims. We're still on the road to destruction, caught up in basic

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perceptions that a certain kind of person is more valuable than other people or beings. When we assign value to one element/subject over another—even when thinking at a highly abstract level—we're ignoring even the possibility of thinking about ourselves outside our supposed "nature."

To go back to the idea of monologue through the artwork, for me it is a kind of catharsis, an antidote for withstanding the world, because everything is so demoralizing. It's also a shield of the imagination. It's really important that the notion of humanity not figure in the artwork since a way of imagining a better world is renouncing the thinking we presume is naturalized based on our own bodies. We either turn into a network or we all disappear. But it's really hard to give up privileges.

DD: I really like the playful aspect of your work. It strikes me that considering reality some sort of game takes away the fear factor.

AM: I use the word play, in English, a lot for titles. It's a generous word. It's a declaration. Play is also touch, execution, confrontation, embodying an idea from its activation. Using paint that overflows across my stagings, I believe pictorial language can be activated in my work, in an installation, and in that way the experience with the artworks becomes performative. It shatters the contemplative relationship and generates a fiction that surrounds the image beyond the limits of the frame, like being a part of a dollhouse. It's painting beyond painting as a device for visual experience—as an interface.