

Metonymies, Transfers, Compressions - Luis Carrera-Maul at the San Carlos Museum

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Pre-text / warning

The artist Luis Carrera-Maul conceived his exhibition *Metonimias, transferencias, compresiones* without curatorial support, without the conceptual crutches, omnipresent in many contemporary art exhibitions. The process of his reflection (in the brain), conceptualization (in the workshop) and materialization (in the museum) generated a result that inspires comments a posteriori, from a distant position. Comments that perhaps offer a different reading to the artist's intentions, that claim the character of the "open artwork" (Umberto Eco), suitable for the creative, complex, even contradictory reception of the visual messages emitted in the courtyard of the San Carlos Museum, in Mexico City, in the fall of 2012 - 225 years after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Italian Journey, and 202 years after the first edition of his *Theory of Color*, both literary, topographical and scientific enterprises that provided an intellectual script inherent to the artist Carrera-Maul.

Text / title

The artist chose a rhetorical figure of the tropes as [bracket] for the inclusion and relation of different elements, raw materials (stone, paper, color), secondary (installation, object, video) and idea (color theory, art topics, landscape and memory). Among the very complex expressions and functions in the rhetorical construction of words and images, metonymy exchanges the original meaning of a verbal or pictorial expression for another meaning. Its definition in ancient Latin (based on the Greek $\mu\epsilon\tau\omega\nu\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$, metonymy) is extended with the term *transnominatio*, which expresses in its first syllable a key principle in Carrera-Maul's work: the transition between different states of materials, territories and connotations. It emerges, and that also includes the definition of metonymy, an element that represents the world (of forms and ideas) as a *pars pro toto*, as part of the whole; in this case, the stones placed in the courtyard of the San Carlos Museum, wrapped in rice paper, painted at random with the drops of color configured by a famous color theory of the early nineteenth century [il.1]. Under the artist's hand (and brain), the "literal" of those stones becomes a new eloquent structure, which moves away from the raw material, in exchange for the exploration of new horizons of understanding.

Those transitions also expand to the other objects exhibited under the metonymy label, specifically to the transfers and compressions of meaning, perceived in an artistic documentary

video [il.2], in the transfigurations of a catalog of Neapolitan art [il.3] and of the accumulation of the artist's academic-scholarly work [il.4].

They are parts of a whole, connected by a common thread, whose alternative potentials and logics are outlined below in this text-all, according to the rhetorical concept of metonymy, in the same sphere of the chosen and portrayed reality. Metonymies draws a virtual but recognizable line, from a topographical transfusion of a wild landscape to the sublimated space of a museum, to the acculturation of stones by conceptual colors, continuing with a reflection on the erosion of a cultural product -an art catalog-, to the compressed memory of the artist's own beginnings, to a silent contemplation. These are the elements and steps of my interpretation, which is a reconstruction of meaning, aware of the limits of words in the face of a highly complex plastic whole. I re-construct metonymic links, challenged by the works exposed, which are -I repeat- works open to the possible transfers within the framework of the contiguity and proximity of metonymy. It is worth mentioning that metonymies are not "mistakes", as defined by the encyclopedist Johann Georg Sulzer in his canonical work for the Enlightenment of the late 18th century, the *General Theory of Fine Arts* (*Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*; 1771, article "Metonymie, Redende Künste"), but productions of new meanings of apparently known things within the same epistemological framework. Carrera-Maul greatly expands the spatial-temporal contiguity, provokes its contemporary reading, furthermore he attributes meaning to the natural elements, and even "mistakes" the cause and effect of things - all this also encompasses metonymies, in Sulzer's theory, or in his older understandings, such as that of Quintilianus or Isidorus Hispanus; and all this in order to call the attention of the observer, to attract his gaze, to stimulate his imagination, as a rhetorical strategy.

Narration / topographical transference

il.2] The "metonymy of stone" begins in a river bed in the province of Veracruz. The path to its transformation is a means of visualizing an important nineteenth-century theory of color is documented in a video, accompanied by the omnipresent acoustic traces in the exhibition space: the courtyard of the San Carlos Museum in Mexico City.

The photographs and stills in the video that capture the sublime scene of a forest with a stream whose flow generates constant metamorphosis in the stones of the shore, present an image of nature as we connect it - erroneously, but successfully - with the notion of the natural landscape. Educated by the visual schemes of German Romantic painting (Caspar David Friedrich et al.), the attentive observer perceives the natural force of autopoietic vegetation, the archaic image of water (the origin of philosophy according to Thales of Miletus) and an impressive geological configuration - that last artistic inspiration of Carrera-Maul.

Organized as a micro-economy of that peripheral and poor place in the Mexican Republic, the artist commissions workers with their mules to transport that geological element to another context, for purposes different from the authentic image of the landscape. To clarify: this

fragment of the Veracruz landscape does not show many traces of "pure, virgin nature", but also presents a cultural landscape with its "secondary successions" (Küster) of agricultural and civilizing uses, or even of forgotten development. In other words, the images (moving and static) captured by Carrera-Maul at this site promise what Alexander von Humboldt called the "total impression of a landscape" (Totaleindruck einer Gegend), but, in this case, as pars pro toto. A part of a whole that conveys the false illusion of a well-protected natural world, the source of vitality for the local fauna and human species. False is not only the assumption that Mexico preserves its outstanding biodiversity well, but also that this landscape determines the topographical identity of Mexicans. After the death of José María Velasco (100 years ago) or Dr. Atl (almost 50 years ago), with exceptions such as Luis Nishizawa, the topic of geo-aesthetics eroded in artistic production and in the collective consciousness. According to my empirical observations, the reality of hyper-urbanization predominates, where any green element is almost crushed by the gray of asphalt and reinforced concrete.

Transferring that almost idyllic image to the interior of a museum that is part of the immense megalopolitan patchwork, attempts to recontextualize a view of the landscape as a metaphor for alienation. For the artist's artistic and didactic purposes, a video is recorded of how the stones are transported, first on the mules on the narrow paths and then in a van on the wide highways of the people lost to the dominant megacity. As an artistic medium, video builds an important part of the bridge of metonymic understanding for this theme.

It is a topographical and also a temporal jump, because - according to Roger Caillois - stone is more durable and older than all the other elements of our biosphere, of plants or of human beings with their limited life cycles. Whoever reflects on the philosophy of stones, as Caillois did, knows that stones are "located in a universe that is contrary to man". Not only the sad reality of the peasants or the alleged "beauty" of their natural environment, but also the archaic nature of the stones interrupt the museological routine of San Carlos.

However, the destination, the museum, built during the transition from the 18th to the 19th century, offers another dimension that Carrera-Maul takes advantage of: it is a building from the time of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a time of romantic-radical painting in search of the essence of colors, which even explores the revolutionary dimensions inherent in the image of sublime natural landscapes, with their rocks, waterfalls and other scenographic-iconographic elements.

The journey documented in the video does not end on the museum's screens, but in its temporary artistic context, in the Carrera-Maul installation, where it receives unexpected stimuli. His images are created in different media -in his own words- "time transposed into image", specifically, a capture of the multidimensionality of the times in which artistic ideas based on the raw material of stone and color are configured. Through the (mobile) medium of video, the "topographic transfusion" (Irving Lavin) is performed, and the artist finds a very obvious method to "transfuse".

Écriture automatique / color, paper, stones

il.1] For about four days after the opening of the exhibition on October 6, 2012, the colors of Goethe's "color circle" dripped onto the twelve stones wrapped in rice paper, all framed by the columns in the round courtyard of the Museum. The drip came from the bags with which blood or energy fluid transfusions are given to hospitalized patients. With this, the exhibition takes another conceptual step, the step that leads from Veracruz to the metonymic dimension of an abstractum: color, to the literary memory of a journey of liberation to the geological settings of Naples.

Much ink has been spilled on the theory of color - by the multi-talented Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a literate, politician, and also an amateur scientist; scientific criticism (by Newtonians) or artistic rehabilitation (by Luis Carrera-Maul). I do not intend to spend much more ink on the subject, but rather observe how the dripping of the six colors (of subtractive synthesis) conceptualized by Goethe in a watercolored hexagram in 1809, promote the epistemological capacity of the observers in the San Carlos Museum, in 2012.

But first I return to the stones (Veracruz), which in the meantime, by the artist's will and action, are covered by rice paper, the background for the colored drip. Thanks to this coverage only the contours of the stones remain as a pregnant form, but not their scratches, bevels, blows, or their inherent textures. An anecdote by the artist reveals something about this decision: his taste for the traces in the sand left by the stones when they are collected; negative forms of the geological impact on the riverside landscape. Carrera-Maul removes the stones' specific textures, and turns them into abstract outlines, giving them the function of a screen for colorful dripping. The idea of ancient China remains, where stone constitutes a world of signatures, generated over thousands of years, but at the same time, the writing on the stones themselves, "drawings without a message" (Caillois), is hidden under a fine material with also oriental esoteric connotations: rice paper. An aesthetic-conceptual decision that favors concentration on a central topic, beyond the morphological diversity of the stones. For the artist, the impression left by the stone on the paper provides sufficient material for contemplation. The observer is offered an introspection to the color on an irregular, but white, background - a "color" that for Goethe represented the totality of them.

In Carrera-Maul's installation, this decision supports the viewer's approach to an abstract subject that requires symbolization. The complex aesthetics of the stone surfaces are excluded, and as in a Buddhist introspection, the simple evidence of these covered surfaces allows for a deepening of the inner gaze on a complex subject. Also the process of emptying the color bags contains an inherent Buddhist dimension: instead of the nervous eye of the scientist, checking the viscosity and gravity of the drip, contemplation opens unexpected dimensions of understanding (what each observer negotiates with his own neuronal capacity). It is an affective control present in this

installation at the San Carlos Museum, as opposed to the idiots savants (Singer/Mathieu) who accumulate data without conceptual capacities beyond their own science.

Here is a possible rescue of Goethe's color theory: his recognition of "human perception" in the understanding of the color phenomenon. Carrera-Maul manages to incite the eye that provides information to the neural networks that give "sense", through the typical relationship between the sensory data of the image and the fictitious parts, commonly called imagination.

While in the history of science and economy, Newton's model prevailed, the classification of colors -yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, green- proposed by Goethe in one of his greatest published works (according to his own estimation), remains valid as an integral model. Although light is not a unit, as Goethe postulated, but, according to Newton, a composite phenomenon whose diverse elements configure color, it is valid to recover Goethe's epistemological path. His theory of color, transferred as an installation to the patio of an art museum, a work in progress on wrapped stones, emanates as a sensory, plastic event, thus evoking the art of the contemplation of nature (the philosophical topic of *Naturbetrachtung*) and the capacity of observation - valuable dimensions even for the inhabitants of the megalopolis at the beginning of the 21st century. The contemporary artist's installation materializes a scientific-psychological stance, reverses his partial anachronism and educates sensory cognition, in a word, it reconceptualizes Aristotelian aisthesis in the broadest sense.

During the observation of the installation, at least during the first four days when the colored bags are emptied onto the rice paper of the stones, visitors witness the autopoietic production of meaning, they see the configuration of a work in real time. It is an automatic writing, determined by the movements of the earth and the wind, which make the cylinders hung as a counterweight to the bags rotate. Windy movements and terrestrial gravity as autonomous creative forces -a theme also present in another of Goethe's literary works, whose reading opens the way to the next metonymic scale.

De-composition / beautiful Naples

The key question of the artist Carrera-Maul that accompanies his creative process is: "how to contain time (history) in space (volume)" A question that accompanied Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on his trip to Italy between 1786 and 1788, when he not only left a literary record of his impressions, but also learned watercolor and drawing as techniques for preserving visual memory - and this is our approach - he paid considerable attention to the topographical and geological conditions of the Italian peninsula. Beyond the literary and archaeological occupation in various points from Italy, Goethe implicitly undertakes a sensory combination of stones and colors, triggering a synergistic neural process, which also characterizes the Carrera-Maul installation.

In a further step, the contemporary artist takes the viewer to some "tablets" from a catalog on Neapolitan painting, entitled *I tre secoli d'oro della pittura napoletana* by Battistello Caracciolo a Giacinto Gigante - and it is the task of someone else's interpretation to reconstruct the possible fabric of meaning of that work, and its relationship to the aforementioned installation and to the complex configuration of Goethe's mind. To this end, we review some fragments of Goethe's stay in Naples, where he stayed for several months, on two occasions, 1786 and 1787. His studies of Neapolitan painting (and of other regions of the Italian peninsula) awakened his growing interest in color, a topic that later inspired the development of his theory of color. Also the perception of the Neapolitan coastal landscape, under a transparent sky, and even the visual micro-absorption of the morphology of the different stones, make him reflect on the nature of colorful light.

The mental-conceptual advantage that Goethe had over the painter who accompanied him to Naples, Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, consisted in the opening up of perception. Goethe notes on 24 Febrero 1787: "To him [Tischbein], the plastic artist, always dedicated to the most beautiful forms of men and animals, who humanizes the amorphous, the rocks and landscapes through sense and taste, will find totally horrible a terrible accumulation, deformed, self-consuming, and which declares war on the feeling of beauty". The literate person with scientific interests is more open to understanding geo-aesthetics more easily than the visual artist, imprisoned in his (relative) normativity of beauty. Other entries of the Neapolitan journey praised the archaic, fascinating aesthetics of limestone, quartz, granite and marble (St. Agata, February 24, 1787, to quote one of the entries with geological themes).

Such rescue of geo-poetics -also inspiration for Carrera-Maul- historically coincides with a transition from mineralogy as a creative and imaginary visual field -the case of Athanasius Kircher in the 17th century, claiming the "iconic spirit" (*bildnerischer Gestaltungsgeist*) in stones- to the university institutionalization of mineralogy as an exact science, which eliminates "fantastic" readings of stones. Despite a metaphysical fixation on German romantic poetry, first by Novalis, it is until the surrealist liberation with Roger Caillois that landscape stones are recognized as "deposits of dreams", where random formations proliferate, inviting to be read by the creative mind.

At first glance, the few images in the catalog *I tre secoli d'oro della pittura napoletana*, which present coastal scenes, where the accumulation of stones serves as a place of suburban contemplation for the Neapolitan population in the 18th century, do not stand out on an international contemporary level. There were others, and sometimes more pictorially striking coastal scenes in European painting in Goethe's time. And the writer-traveler himself criticized (in the entry of May 28, 1787) that "no painter of the Neapolitan school has ever been profound, careful".

Not only by the relative evaluation of the maximum master of the discourses in Europe at the end of the 18th century, Goethe, but also by means of comparative studies of the history of art, we can verify that this work exhibited and revised (in the catalog of the San Carlos Museum, in 2003) does not stand out - reason for Carrera-Maul to let his reproductions disappear in a tablet.

On an academic level, the contribution of the texts in the catalog is humble; in many cases, the authors did not even manage to date the work exhibited properly, and the analysis of the paintings is often limited to atmospheric descriptions. Moreover, its bilingual presentation, first in Italian and then in Spanish (in italics, which prevent easy reading) does not make sense to the Mexican public, but rather is due to a nationalist-arrogant attitude to promote a language that no longer has the importance in the world of the arts as it did in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe.

As a result, that catalog did not sell well, and its hundreds of copies rotted in the museum's warehouse. The editorial format of the "exhibition catalog" implies a general problem, since overproduction and accelerated intellectual expiration encourage the erosion of such products. For various reasons, this catalog did not attract the attention of the San Carlos Museum's illustrated public, and its remaining copies are turned into trash or, at least, into recycled paper - an ideal condition for the artist Carrera-Maul, who collects different types of paper, books, maps, among others, to be turned into tablets. -In parenthesis: this conversion of a publishing product with many expectations can also happen to our publication; perhaps in the future it will be converted into tablets- Carrera recycles the cultural garbage of the past in its metonymic contexts, and in this way offers an interesting alternative to the theory of kitsch, elaborated by Vilem Flusser. That theorist analyzed the process as the dysfunctional artifacts of art or everyday life in the transition from the society of industry to the information society, describe an erosion of values, which museums (of art or popular cultures) desperately try to stop through their exhibition. Stripped of their original contents and connotations, the artifacts become garbage - prepared by the museographies, or simply ending up as kitsch (for example in the postcards of Naples, Capri, Ischia, among others with the azure sky).

Carrera-Maul also slows down the erosion process when producing tablets. The material in the catalog does not serve as recycling paper, but as an innovative and ironic artistic proposal. It is an unexpected turn that is perceived by observers of the tablets on display. It is a recycling of cultural garbage (according to Flusser's thesis) into a new, contemporary art object. Semi-plastic images emerge that let us see some fragments of the illustrations of the Neapolitan painting, at random; a decomposition whose fragments generate another sense. A storage of obsolete cultural information, which is revived in other contexts.

In a certain way, it is a radicalization of the cultural idea of compression -present in art libraries, even in the hard disks of computers or the anachronistic CDs in museums-, they are almost geological cuts of the cultural layers, which reveal random iconic fragments, generate an index that does not offer logical-linear "sense", but revives certain practices of the Fluxus and other avant-garde (Paik, Cage) that diminished the canonical "centers" of sense in the work of art. With that neo-Fluxus spirit, Carrera-Maul is part of an iconoclastic tradition of the avant-garde, without abandoning the traditional format of the painting. Moreover, the visible fragments of the reproductions of Neapolitan painting, where water, stone and colors appear in a new logic, mark the metonymic thread of his exhibition.

Memory / Compressor Cylinder

il.4] One of the few tablets selected for this exhibition is a cylinder, that is, not a work with the outlines of a traditional rectangular painting. This tablet stands out because it contains the pictorial memory of the artist in his first phase of training at the San Carlos Academy between 1995 and 1996. It contains the pictorial memory of a search process, irreversibly compressed, that is, without the possibility of nostalgic access to the artist's early paintings.

Beyond the mentioned cultural and avant-garde idea, inherent to the compressed format, this type of artistic work also allows ludic-ironic associations, of which I mention some; readers will find more. In the times of the internet as the ultimate discursive machine nowadays, searches in the depth of the net indicate the Zip of the heavy file, but also the tablet is a compressed one. However, both are opened or dissolved in the act of searching, and then do not serve as a simile for artistic tablets. Nor is the cartridge case, filled with explosives, conceptually inside those tablets; only the detonating effect in the eye of the observer could open an alternative, perhaps metonymic, clue to understanding.

Closer to home is a scene from the film *Goldfinger* / 007 James Bond (1964), where the "bad guy" in the film apparently pays off his debt to another gangster with a gold box. The gangster pretends to carry this box in the trunk of the car with his investment back to the airport, and although the gold blocks survive their murdered owner on the road, the typical unintended irony of many Bond films reaches its peak when the driver lets the vehicle and the gold box be "compressed" in a car cemetery, and then takes that tablet in a van to *Goldfinger* - creating the need to metallurgically separate it from the valuable, scrap metals of the car. That block that shows arbitrary elements of metal, plastic and gold fragments may be one of the unknown origins of the tablet.

But also in the history of modern Mexican art we excavate a conceptual antecedent of the Carrera-Maul tablet. When Manuel Maples Arce hung his manifesto "Actual No. 1" on the walls of Mexico City one night in 1921, he called it a "strident tablet. The radical impulse coincides with the idea of Carrera-Maul, but without the pathos of literary concentration.

All of these anecdotes, fragments of a conceptual genealogy of the tablet, do not relativize Carrera-Maul's cultural impact today, but rather indicate that the act of compression seems to be an "instinct of humanity," as the artist puts it. In times of abundance, oversupply, inflation, and cultural obesity, the act of compression gains meaning. And in the end, it must have been liberating for the artist to creatively detach himself from early schoolwork.

Contemplation / aisthesis, neurons

At the end of this text, which does not "explain" the work exhibited, but rather accompanies it, there is room for reflection on the scope and limits of the messages, both verbal and iconic. "When I want to write words," Goethe noted on March 17, 1786, in Naples, "images always jump out at me [...], and I lack the organs to represent all that.

Beyond words, and beyond the production of meanings (of landscape, of stones, of memory) and their interpretation, emanates a plastic work, which calls for a striking aesthetic presence. Although this message may not fit into a fixed logical structure, nor into metonymies, visual events with unpredictable effects arise. Hans-Georg Gadamer thought that the incomprehensible, the absence of "sense", marks the limit of freedom of understanding. Not everything is understandable (in contemporary art), but recent neurological research teaches us that no visual stimulus is in vain. On the contrary, the 1011 neurons, which produce 1014 synaptic connections in the human brain, carry an epistemological potential, with a complexity that many curators and critics do not reach. Essential parts of the brain function to process visual stimuli, and only a minor part is dedicated to language, to abstract thought - a problem that Goethe already noticed in his Italian journey. The aisthesis, sensory and neural capacity, is the starting point for evaluations and decisions.

In this sense, the observation of the exhibition *Metonimias*, transfers, compressions requires time and peace of mind, in a word: contemplation, that ancient technique with much actuality. Contemplation that also generates other readings, other schemes of understanding the world, its colors, stones, landscapes. I end my reflection with a sentence by Ludwig Wittgenstein: "And that is why the glow of the aspect half visual event, half thought appears.

Illustrations

1] Installation in the courtyard of the San Carlos Museum; photograph (?)

2] Video

3] Neapolitan painting tablet

4] Cylindrical tablet, early work of LC

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