

Processes of image production in Luis Carrera-Maul's work, between observation and responsibility

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FOR A DYNAMIC CONCEPT OF WORK

Luis Carrera-Maul's work channels the concept of work in contemporary art in a way that links at different levels of time and action with museum presentation.

The twentieth century witnessed the countless attempts by the vanguards to deconstruct, broaden and rediscover the concept of work in the visual arts; and in spite of this, the systems of specific values, expectations and patterns are still intact in their domain. The work is understood as an object, its characteristics identify it and establish it as art. The artistic product—sculpture, painting or installation—is understood as a static state; exhibited in a showcase or upon a base, framed and provided with a title, it is subtracted from the flow of time. The processes of change, in principle, oppose the idea of collection in a museum.

While intending to analyze the concept of the inanimate, various artists focused on transient moments. One of the aspects was the material.¹ By contrast to resistant materials such as marble and bronze, organic material slowly entered the world of art and with this the system of values of the museums was put to the test. Jannis Kounellis even exhibited live horses.² However, it is significant that, ultimately, the preserving element triumphed.³ Instances of this can be found in Piero Manzoni, who packed his feces in food cans; Marc Quinn, who froze a bust of himself made with his own blood; or Damien Hirst, who submerged animals in formaldehyde following the tradition of natural sciences museums.⁴

Another aspect of the search for an instant of time and anachronistic historicities emphasizes less markedly an interest in the transitory elements of materiality itself than the artistic gesture that focuses on the processes. And it is here where the complex strategy of Luis Carrera-Maul is located and begins.

In the analysis of such potentialities, current art history is swift to resort to a vocabulary taken from theater studies and speaks of *performing strategies*; nevertheless, I find this overly vague and general. At present, I consider it sensible to start from the category of production process; after all, we know that Carrera-Maul's exhibitions create the impression of a classic exhibition, and display groups of aesthetic formations and constellations.

In the sense of the concept of work previously outlined, we still depart from a clear separation between the moment of production and the exhibition device.⁵ The labor of the artist, his struggle with the *Physis*, occurs in a place that, on principle, is different from the clear spaces of a staged performance. By means of the institutional framework, of the architectural vocabulary by which cultural labor is valued, a radical transformation takes place. The mark is established and the link with the work is interrupted; the traces of the artist's inscription in the work material come to an end. The relation of the work to the processes of creation belongs to the central problems of modernity and contemporariness, for the implications are broad. They refer to the notion we have of the artist, and also to the utopias of power and efficacy of the work in the world. The history of art acknowledges radically opposed models. On the one side, we find the absolute negation of the production process, which can extend to confidentiality requirements for employees as part of contractual clauses; for example, in the case of artists such as Jeff Koons, whose hands are not involved in the process.⁶ On the other side, there is a variety of approaches to make the process visible as a trace in a work. The category of the fragment and the high status of the sketch represent this perspective.

The interests of Luis Carrera-Maul go one step beyond. The production processes are integral components of the exhibited work, and it tells the different stories of its origins and production. In this Carrera-Maul circumvents in a surprising manner one of the traps of processual work. When Harold Rosenberg by the end of the 1950s in a programmatic and surprising manner described the paradigm of the *action painters* and their works as a sign of life, using the *abstract expressionists* as an example, he was paying homage to a heroic image of the artist. The individual biography, the corresponding experiences and sensations are the origin of great gestures.

When Carrera-Maul describes moments of creation, we do not listen to stories that match Rosenberg's distinction. Rather, we verify well-considered actions that inscribe in a personality that observes and shapes his surroundings. Personally, I will never forget how the artist told me about the search and transportation of the heavy stones for his great installation *Metonimias* (2012) at the National Museum of San Carlos.

It is much more than the realization of a concept informed by cultural history. It is not an anecdote about the difficulties of the transportation process managed by helpers. On the contrary, narrations, video and photographs record the artist as a field researcher, as an observer who works with the material they encounter.⁷ On a subsequent level we find the explanations and negotiations that transmit his interest in stones, his selection and his objective in relation to the local inhabitants. After all, it is the remuneration of helpers and transportation with mules.⁸ Here there emerges an understanding of collective work; sociologist Howard S. Becker, in the 1970s, described "art as collective action," which is still the basis for current statements that redefine the image of the artist.⁹

When the aesthetic-productive process turns into an integral component, one that generates meaning for the work, the actions of the artist as a member of society can be discussed again.¹⁰ Economic elements, geo-cultural localizations, observations and decisions do not have the purpose of legitimizing the production of objects and *commodities*, but of becoming part of the form the artist searches. Used as an actual element of Carrera-Maul's project, the transfer paradigm approaches a political and ethical dimension of the utmost actuality, which is retaken by contemporary art.

One might compare the work of Bernese artist George Steinmann with that of his Mexican peer. Steinmann is also interested in the place of an intervention, as a system of complex references to another place. Often, the site (or place) of the periphery is "reflected" toward a center, which refers again to the "absent place".¹¹ Which sort of wood was utilized for an installation? Why does the public sector foresee the purchase of the cheapest wood, this is to say, wood that has to be imported from abroad, if the project takes place precisely in a community that depends on the success of its wood industry?

Can I disengage the money for a *Kunst am Bau* (art projects related to the construction of a building)¹² from the tax collection office of a project and *transport* the artistic intervention to a poorly developed community? How do I deal with the situation if the placement of a large circle of stones must make room for new urban planning concepts and developmental processes? Steinmann successfully strived to reintegrate the enormous stones into the landscape which they were taken from as a part of the artistic gesture. The production of a work thus becomes the demonstration of a stance in relation to the world, a communication gesture made form.¹³

GENESIS OF THE IMAGE

Carrera-Maul chose the stones and *collectively* transported them to make a circle framed by the formulae of *pathos* of the historical and venerable institution. He does not make sculptures out of them, but uses them as agents. With references to alien cultural techniques, the artist initiates one more process, which he sets up as if it were a laboratory, to now go back as a manager. The device, the combination of stone with paper and drops of color serve as a transfer process. It is

neither possible nor necessary to verbally specify what passes from the stone to the paper that wraps it. The code for the genesis of the image is based upon the rhythm of drops and the time that elapses. After conceiving the constellation, the artist retreats before the process of transformation into an image, the focus is directed at the regularity proper to the dripping of color, the paper is the medium and the stone, the starting point.

In the end, when the paper is removed from the stone, abstract color compositions appear. The aesthetic language of the fine structuring of traces and imprints¹⁴ represents the *state of aggregation* of a work, which acquires relevance in the process and duration. The history of materials, the artist's narration and the transferences condense inside the new constellation. A complex game of immediateness and mediation, of absence and presence is established for the audience. Any hierarchy between different moments and ways of working dissolves: they always refer to something past or to something about to occur. This system of references keeps the image on its own from becoming a fragment.

The itinerant exhibition selected by the artist, by way of mediation, broadens and finally completes this complex production process. The discovery processes and decisions, physical transportation, memories, traces and documentation find a new simultaneity, in which the experience of the audience is to be found.

Notes

¹ Wolfgang Kemp, *Material der bildenden Kunst. Zu einem ungelösten Problem der Kunstwissenschaft*, in *Prisma*, Dec., 1975, pp. 26-34; Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien*. Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1994. ² Tristan Manco, *Matériaux + Art = Oeuvre. Quand les artistes contemporains font appel à des matériaux naturels ou recyclés*. Paris: Pyramyd, 2012; Ralf Beil, *Künstlerküche. Lebensmittel als Kunstmaterial - von Schiele bis Jason Rhoades*. Cologne: DuMont, 2002; Eduardo Cicelyn and Mario Codognato (eds.), *Jannis Kounellis*, exhibition catalogue in Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, October 20th 2006 - January 21st 2007. Schaan: Gutenberg, 2007. ³ Tatja Scholte and Glenn Wharton, *Inside Installations. Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks*. Amsterdam: University Press, 2011; Miguel Angel Corzo, *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999. ⁴ Martin Engler (ed.), *Piero Manzoni: Als Körper Kunst wurden*, exhibition catalogue in Frankfurt am Mein, Städel Museum, June 26th – September 22nd 2013. Bielefeld, Berlin: Kerber, 2013; Gerald Silk, *Myths and Meanings in Manzoni's Merda d'artista*, in *Art Journal*, 52(3): 65-75, 1993; Ann Gallagher (ed.), *Damien Hirst*, exhibition catalogue in London, Tate Modern, April 4th – September 9th 2012. Munich: Prestel, 2012. ⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane, 2008; Carol Yinghua Lu et al. (eds.), *Work in Progress: How do artists work*, exhibition catalogue in Iberia Center for Contemporary Art. Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2009; Markus Landert and Dorothee Messmer (eds.), *10.000 Stunden. Über Handwerk, Meisterschaft und Scheitern in der Kunst*, exhibition catalogue in Kunstmuseum Thurgau, May 13th – September 30th 2012. Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2012. ⁶ John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form. Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London / New York: Verso, 2007; Michael Petry, *The Art of not making. The new Artist / Artisan Relationship*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2011. ⁷ Günter Metken, *Spurensicherung. Kunst als Anthropologie und Selbsterforschung. Fiktive Wissenschaft in der heutigen Kunst*. Cologne: DuMont, 1977; Uwe M. Schneede and Günter Metken (eds.), *Spurensicherung. Archäologie und Erinnerung*, exhibition catalogue in Kunstverein. Hamburg: Kunstverein, 1974. ⁸ See Robert Smithson's, "Site (or place) and the no-place", in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1996. ⁹ Howard S. Becker, *Art worlds*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1982. ¹⁰ Rolf-Dieter Herrmann, *Der Künstler in der modernen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Mein: Athenaeum, 1971; Marian Golka, *The sociology of the artist in the postmodern era: pride and uncertainty*. Berlin: Lit, 2013. ¹¹ George Steinmann, *Kunst ohne Werk, aber mit Wirkung*. Basel: Transfusionen, 2012; George Steinmann, *Das Werk Saxeten*. Berna: G. Steinmann, 2005. ¹² "After 1945 many German cities were in ruins, their reconstruction was one of the greatest challenges for postwar German policies. Even more

impressing is the decision of the Bundestag [Lower Chamber of German Parliament] on January 25th, 1950. In views of promoting plastic arts, the Parliament decides to collect at least one percent, which later become two percent, of the construction costs of all building works in the confederation to be destined for works of art. The aim of this legislation was to give new impulses to the cultural life ruined by the Nazis". See Kaernbach, Andreas, (Undated); *Kunst am Bau - Geschichte und Zielsetzung*, in Deutscher Bundestag: Available at: http://www.bundestag.de/kulturundgeschichte/kunst/kunst_am_bau/246974 [Translator's note].¹³ George Steinmann, *Sätze zur Zeit der Steine*. Bern: G.Steinmann, 1995; Hildegard Kurt, *Kultur - Kunst - Nachhaltigkeit*. Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2002; Sacha Kagan, *Art and sustainability: Connecting patterns for a culture of complexity*, vol. 25. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011. ¹⁴ See the historical and anthropological importance of trace in George Didi-Huberman, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung: Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks*. Cologne: DuMont, 1999.