

CÉSAR MANRIQUE AND THE IMPOSSIBLE FUTURE

BY JONATHAN ALLEN

We are in the midst of the earth. We wonder at what seems a fossilized tortuous system of irrigation: primeval magma flows. The sensation we feel when we see the petrified lava river never diminishes. Stone that is flowing in immobility. The place described is none other than Los Jameos del Agua, a natural grotto in the heart of an ancient lava flow in Lanzarote. There is pure, crystalline water in the underground pool dominating the centre, that mocks the metaphor of fluid rock. Art has intervened in this rugged subterranean beauty, turning the wild appearance of the earth into something pastoral. A winding stone staircase leads us from the surface down to a platform with restaurant chairs and tables. While we descend, exotic plants strangely "in place", (ferns, cactii, yams) delight the eye. In this rocky refuge only moss and small species can theoretically grow. A brilliant choreographer has been at work. The whole scene of the Jameos del Agua makes up a natural grotto almost unparalleled in effect, that would outstrip the fame of classical european examples. Manrique brought the spirit of Bomarzo, of the wonder of the renaissance garden to all of

the Canary Islands. Manrique was the building machine of an impossible future. An artist who renewed the pejorative antiqueness of the traditional canarian rural house, the man who defended the intrinsic beauty of old rough shapes facing the Atlantic Ocean, that have survived in deep isolation. The first time I visited the Jameos del Agua as a boy, and more recently, when I toured the artist's last residence at Haría, I felt that Manrique had created the ideal architectural style of the Canaries, although such a vision was paradoxically "impossible".

For Manrique concepts and ideas were simple things: organic architecture and integration of art in nature that would achieve deep rooted humanist "urges". Manrique, strictly speaking, couldn't build. To the contrary, his was a pseudo-architecture. He recovered ideal pre-urban principles that he then directed to saving urban chaos. It was an amending sensibility that could only be marginally applied in areas of urban planning disaster. His difference, what clearly defined his sensitivity towards space, was his lack of technological know-how. His

antitechnocratic spirit prevented him from joining in the endless war waged by the theorists of urban planning in the islands, and who one day, may be able to overcome the failure of their building ideas in cities like Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Manrique was anti-city and pro-rural. For instance, his solution to the lurid urban developments of the Grand Canary South was plain "scorched earth" policy. A municipal town planner can't theoretically lay waste all that has been edified by fellow colleagues, and if indeed he feels something similar, it remains a repressed fantasy. He is forced to accept the process of gradual rationalization applied to a chaotic, "collapsed" space.

Manrique unconsciously became an alternative solution, the symbol of utopian future, and the most dynamic integrator of art, space and leisure, probably because he wasn't overobsessed by solely egoistic forms of modernity/postmodernity. Antoni Gaudí had this blend of staunch tradition and an amazingly free technical and aesthetic mind, (to a much superior degree). Manrique was not only the innovator of the already mentioned traditional values of popular canarian architecture, but the designer of an aesthetic concept that fused austerity with exoticism. (for example, his adaptation of balearic motifs in decor that he combined with a recycling of typical manufactured canarian goods), and that surprisingly seemed ideally suited to the atmospheres of his environments and spaces. Something else would be to accept this

synthesis unconditionally as a local dominant style that could be imposed on any future urban plan.

Sometimes university teaching of architecture seems to inhibit the creative capacity of the architect. To impair the scope of natural response. The orthodoxy of schools together with the effect of theoretical constructs that at times benefit from an artificially extended life, may turn a building designed for life into aggressive, unlivable space. (We can cite a few cases: the french HLM, the 60's Building Estates in Great Britain, or the Viviendas Protegidas of the 70's and early 80's in Spain). Manrique moved in "organic time" as Mircea Eliade would have said, for he projected ideas of organic harmony. His attitude towards architecture was admirably expressed in that exceptional catalogue he entitled: "Lanzarote, An Unknown Architecture".

This singular work is a photographic essay on the most notable characteristics of precarious rural lanzarotian architecture, an elegy to the incipient ruin, disdained in favour of the vulgar ergonomics used to build the chalet on the beach or the second residence in the countryside. Every group of isolated buildings, every wall and façade Manrique fixed his lens on becomes a discovered volume that varies according to the effects of light, (dawn, midday or dusk). The book is also a melancholy affair. The "undiscovered" architecture that he rescues from oblivion and that he in one way or another incorporates into

his praxis simultaneously becomes an impossible solution, at least in terms of urban development for it symbolizes a past link between man and nature. When the stylistic elements of the traditional canarian rural house are recovered as a new social initiative the result is a row, or several rows, of semi-detached houses flaunting superficial traditionalism. This serialization destroys the rural house's charm, because its sense of natural harmony came from a wisely established site, correctly oriented and occupying "secondary" ground that didn't interfere with valuable arable land. Solitude, visibility and distance are three traits of this rural tradition. If once they represented the condition of humbleness now they represent wealth, for only the better off in such a small territory as the islands can afford such luxuries. This original old world poverty is now real estate speculation, save in some enlightened cases, where the heirs of traditional property spontaneously decide to restore and conserve the ancestral home.

Manrique is our surreally late version of the italian garden architect Pirro Ligorio, the creator of the renaissance naturalist fantasy. In the Canary Islands, grottos are a frequent and fertile geological accident, set in exuberant contrast with the sub-tropical vegetation. Often the european grotto has had to simulate stone and rock through clever use of stucco, or it has had to build "natural" atmospheres. Manrique goes one further. In a sense he forces a

kitsch development introducing artificial harmonies between rock and flower; this is one of his key visual ideas, that nearly a century ago the symbolist-modernist painter and designer Néstor de la Torre began to explore.

Néstor de la Torre had inherited the fin-de-siècle symbolist fascination for exotic plants, minerals and birds. Modelling the fleshy shapes of certain insular species and exaggerating plants so that they became visual subjects he gave island vegetation a transcendent aura. This is noticeable throughout his paintings and in his choreographic projects directed towards a revitalization of folklore. As opposed to Manrique, Néstor's architecture is much more urban, though it is similarly multistylistic. Mixture of a certain rationalism with an art nouveau accentuation of line applied to insular forms, all with the "swollen" proportions of cubist volumetric emphasis. Néstor accentuates the characteristics of popular design till he gives them a kind of pop stoutness; he is the inventor of an art and craft general design that wishes to aesthetify the expression of a new and powerful tertiary industry: mass tourism. Akin to Manrique, Néstor foments a traditionalist revolution, as he is a restorer and conservator of the rural landscape, although he generates a colonialist dynamic subliminally. His canary architecture, his folkloric cavalcade, fitted smoothly into a regional concept that francoist centralism was willing to tolerate. Manrique's circumstances were

different, he lived through the transition to democracy, yet he always knew how to be in the good books of power. However, his naturalist inclinations made his forms and his style freer than Néstor's. The traditional social realist style frescos he painted for the old Parador at Arrecife evidently reveal conservative tastes, yet they appear innocent in comparison to Néstor de la Torre's plans for the National Parador at Tejada in Grand Canary. In these a vast chimney dominates a lounge; the height of the walls, the overall magnitude of space takes us immediately into the realm of fascist architecture. Néstor has conceived a canarian version of a luxurious german alpine retreat, that made sense in Franco's dictatorial Spain. In the aerial perspective drawings that Néstor made of the Pueblo Canario and the Tejada Parador, a mass of faithful subjects flock round the buildings, bearing local folkloric dress that he has designed. The uncritical, homogeneous society of nationalist regionalism.

Manrique's sensibility is determined by nature and history; he can't ignore nature's "indications" and merely conceive mental, abstract ideas for social urban building. The sixteenth century castle, the old farm house, the volcanic air bubble or the natural grotto are the elements that enable him to forge a new vision. His folkloric ambitions, his art and craft interest is quite limited, unlike his famous predecessor, for Manrique always has to work with unique natural scenery. His architecture is intraterrestrial, semi-

subterranean. Fortunately he doesn't know how to raise a building. He scenifies a natural scene, and his critical commentaries or ideas on art's function are almost monotonously the same, despite vigorous expression.

Recent urban development reality was simply distasteful for Manrique. Criminal. His constant and forceful criticism in the media of such appalling errors was the manifestation of his political self. He spoke plainly: we have destroyed the coast-line by making it urban ground, we have turned tourism into a substandard service because we have massified it. These errors committed during the seventies have affected our most recent history negatively. They are the outcome of weak and vacillating municipal governments that have tolerated illegal building in exchange for short term political benefits. A form of sub-culture stemming from social discontinuity usually the result of catastrophe in very specific models of agricultural production, (the collapse of cochinita, the collapse of the tomato and the banana), and a prolonged crisis in the agrarian structure of the island brought about by mass tourism in the 60's. We have to add a further factor, general to the 80's in Europe, the easy money mentality.

However Manrique isn't able to solve the acute urban problems of contemporary canarian cities irrationally and aggressively built up, because his organic ideas aren't a workable model for western

urban planning. This is akin to the "exclusiveness" of the Green Revolt, and the Green Future that has to propose a very gentle, almost timid decentralizing revolution, that can only enjoy fringe success. Against the determinism of the city as the centre of population, culture and industry, Manrique was disarmed, he didn't even further a decentralizing programme, partly because he felt he couldn't fully trust the local institutions and the local authorities. He set up as a "marginal", working on the periphery of disaster. His architecture is non-valid as a real option for a municipal government, as cost is directed to achieving harmony between man, housing and nature. Nonetheless his gardens, with their eolic sculptures and mobiles became an immensely valuable source of relief. Any working class person can walk through them even if they can't have in their habitat such ideal spatial proportion. Manrique's "retrorevolution", his eco-conservatism, the aesthetics of the environment as fundamental value for the islands are superior, impossible ambitions. Contemporary canary society is trying to improve its urban plight through flexible rationalism, yet Manrique's ideas still have an aura of cultural élitism and enlightened marginality. A vast all-sorts crowd followed his coffin to the grave. The day he died I remember farmers talking about him. At least the idea and the memory of his uncompromising defense of nature and insular aesthetics was felt by many, beyond class and wealth. His environmental crusade eventually received

universal reward. This year UNESCO declared Lanzarote “Biospheric Reserve”. Thus, the island of Lanzarote, a “minor” island in regional terminology, (there are two capital islands, Las Palmas and Tenerife with different “minor islands” attached to them) has been saved and it can re-enter paradise, (the classical paradise of the Hespérides), as indeed could happen with El Hierro, La Palma, and La Gomera, that haven’t suffered in the same concentrated way the ravages of demographic explosion and economic progress. The idea of new wave ecology recovering the paradisiacal essence of these island is riddled with doubt and uncertainty. We must not allow aesthetic tourist-industry inclined theories to dominate our reality and to determine false categories. The paradise island of the West Indies is an example of such glossy “unreality”, for reality is the sum total of geography and life, environment and social destiny.

Manrique’s painting is similarly structured by an archaic principle, by a representation of geological time; contemporary images based on organicist art. This manner of inspiration is admirably suited to the concept of the intraterrestrial, semisubterranean house. He visualizes anatomical debris; skeletons, human and animal, deformed by time and distance, covered by layers of vividly coloured rock powder, resins and pigments. He paints semi-abstract telluric icons, a poetry of death and decay that also emerges powerfully in the work of the

painter José Dámaso, his life-long friend. However, death in Dámaso is extremely overt and refined, a gory pageant, that is reminiscent of the decadentism we find in the French novel at the close of last century. Manrique’s decadence is attenuated by his abstract materiality yet wholly obvious. His brilliant painting, *Dead Squids*, (Calamares Muertos), 1973, has something of the cold gem-like black that Des Esseintes loved so much. Dámaso introduces mannerist and baroque overtones to his hyped up death, (drag outfits, buttons, lace, lurid colour). Manrique freezes it under eons of geology. In a sense he is projecting the fossil that we should find in rock, making use, once again of nature’s treasure trove.

If we analyse properly his hidden and abstract forms glazed by fire and heat, a fantastic anatomy emerges, beyond mere skeletal testimony: fish that swim under the earth. *Calcined Insect*, (1975), looks like a toy, a surreal automaton. Manrique alleviates the gloominess of his subterranean graves with the whimsical, strange shapes of his fauna. In *Thirty Thousand Years*, a weird puppet beams at us. An elf dwelling inside the earth. His three dimensional creatures that made up the series of Fauna Atlántica are the sculptural embodiment of the icons.

When Manrique first exhibited his abstract work in Madrid at the end of the 40’s, it did not have such telluric implications, though his colour range was already established: deep cold blues, reds, yellows

and all the imaginable nuances of brown. He had been influenced by European abstract 50’s art. Burri’s humble sack cloth, Fontana’s spatial flights, Tàpies “minimal” gesture that came after his surrealism. The volcanic island of Lanzarote has the uncanny ability to intensify this abstract materialism, and this is evident not only in the natural superabundance of earthy tones present in its soil that artists directly throw onto the canvas, but also in an unconscious predetermination of subject, a mimetic cloud that seduces the painter. Such influence could be found clearly in the first work of Juan Gopar at least until a few years back, and can be easily felt in the work of the german painter Klaus Berends who has settled in Fuerteventura where his classic Beuys oriented purity has found an enormously wealthy “poor” land.

I think that Manrique’s playful self has created these weird animals, all a bit silly and innocent. More seriously, the ludic elements of his environment works represent the will to escape from the tyranny of the womb-like earth he loved. It took me a long time to realize what his strange, sometimes bizarre land art meant. The great lava sculpture by Tony Gallardo, on a promontory off the Grand Canary north coast, is a colossus defying the ocean. Its monumentality in Lanzarote would be reduced to mere anecdote. Manrique understood that the mimesis of nature belonged to painting and its illusory ways, and that the earth was apt for play, for the intricate machines of man.