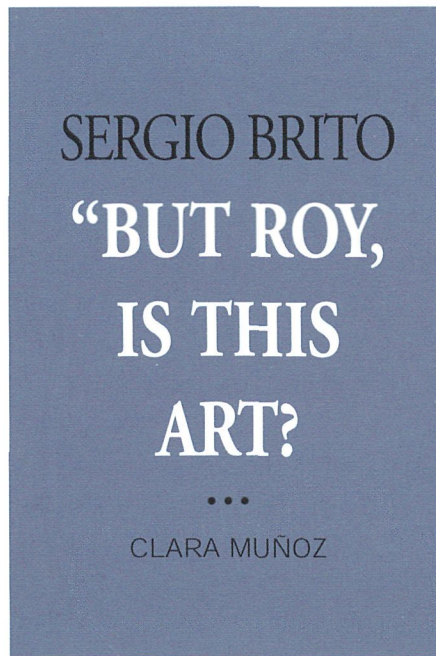


If Sergio Brito were to disappear this very afternoon, it would be quite unforgivable since it would leave us in mid-sentence, interrupting a conversation which began back in the early 90's when he took part in an exhibition at the Caja Canarias Gallery in La Laguna (Tenerife). At this group show, I was fascinated by one of his sculptures: it consisted of two large, differently sized stars, one white and the other red, touching at the tip of one of their points in an act of impossible equilibrium. To counter the sobriety of these two elements, the artist had added a small furry object to the finished piece, attaching it to one of the stars. This round, metal-grey furry object, whose hairy body stood out against the pure forms of the stars, gave us a clue that there was something funny going on. Something which urged us to play the game, to tread his ground and crack the code of an atypical artist who is definitely not resigned to Minimalism's usual pure sobriety or the facile decorative kitsch which has degenerated from Pop art. Getting to know Sergio Brito's work, stepping into such a personal and, to a certain extent, hermetic world of creativity, is rather like buying a one-way ticket to vertigo. He takes all previous approaches to such extremes that they can come across as strange or even shocking. Brito's vehemence carries us to the limits of exaggeration; he reveals the most excessive, voluptuous side of any chosen theme. I can hardly remember the rest of the exhibits at the Gallery, but I certainly recall my desire to further explore the personal discourse of this artist who was clearly an expert in the laws of seduction and, with no intention of the kind, had managed to draw my attention to his creations. We met several years later, and were able to continue



that dialectic in which the artist always has the first word.

For some time now, art has been watching the world, scrutinizing the field of both public and private life, reflecting on the experiences of contemporary existence. We live in a society which is lacking in any great convictions, but which is aware that progress is no longer an entirely positive force; we pay a high price for it, and it would be all too easy to destroy our environment completely. Therefore, as a group, we are very vulnerable to and continually affected by the mass media's incessant attempts to aim its strategies directly at our subconscious. Through advertising, the media tries to make us want a host of consumer goods, thereby turning us into regular buyers of all kinds of products which periodically flood the market. With considerable visual impact, fluorescent signs, billboards, television commercials and window displays at large department stores all display the goods we want to buy: the embodiment of progress and the lifestyle to which most people aspire. The art world does not escape the influence of

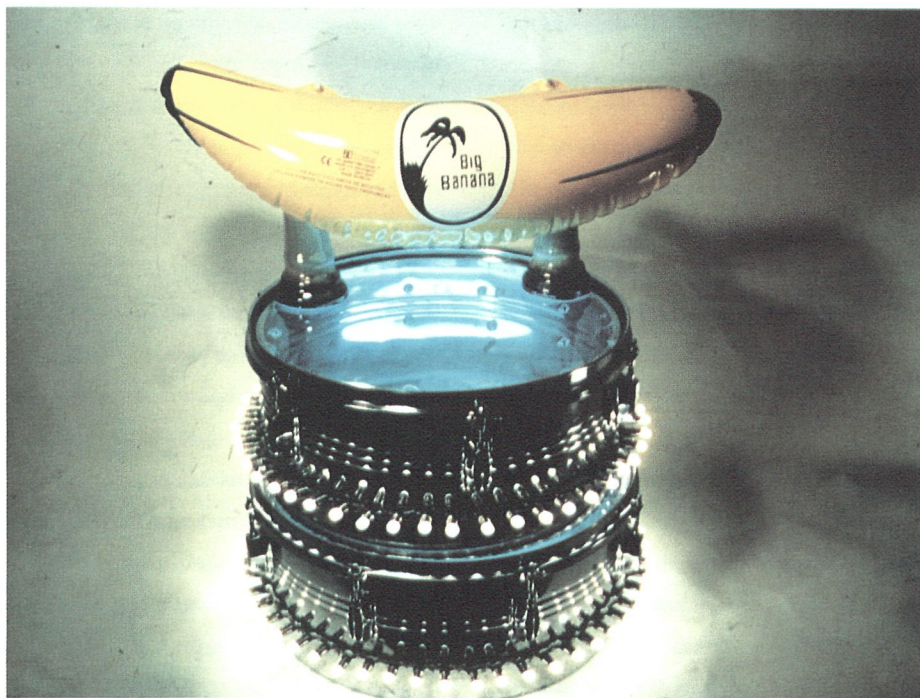
this reality, or the codes, concepts and categories established in our communication systems. The ways we interact with the world around us are perfectly controlled by the mass media; with their vast infrastructure, they continually carry out market research in order to ascertain the aspirations, desires and even the most hidden dreams of each and every one of us.

Within this complex context, and fully aware of the trivialization of art inherent in all mass-media societies, Sergio Brito inverts the language of advertising and combines it with his own discourse. He competes with the media by exaggerating their messages and pushing them to extremes; in so doing, he reveals the permanent seduction to which Guy Debord refers in his book "The Society of Spectacle". Sergio Brito says: "My work is influenced by this 'show-biz' language and, although I am against the rhetoric of the established order, I do use its syntax". He often employs allegorical references to reflect the saturation of imagery both in the art world and in everyday life, and the way consumers are constantly forced by the increasingly hi-tech mass media, which have indeed become the 'spectacle' envisaged by the Situationists. In the early 90's, Brito made a collection of pieces grouped under the heading *Adorno y Vacío*. This series is based on the emptiness of our society, as defined by thinkers such as Lipovetsky and Baudrillard, and employs decoration and fantasy as the main working materials. Artificial light is also incorporated into many of the pieces, thus altering our perception of the installation space. A large red *Ruby* lit up by a circle of lights, and a piece of furniture with a white *Heart* surrounded by flashing bulbs, are both references to a society in which the

omnipresence of ostentatious, wrap-around images is considered the norm. A system which is incapable of changing the course of economic production in an increasingly aggressive market, and sells its products not on the basis of quality or usefulness but because of their visual impact. The laws of seduction have long since played a major role, and countless professionals are employed to make us want all the things which fashion dictates as 'must-haves'. Sergio Brito leads us into this ambiguous world of superfluity, enchanting banality, sickening exuberance, cheap glitter and the most misleading ostentation employed by the mass media to tempt us. Much of his work inhabits the behind-the-scenes of appearances, in the theatre of representation and desire; in all that which is apparently obvious, it seeks the complex reactions of exasperation with this obviousness, and in apparent complexity, the simplicity of delight in all things complex.

Brito delights in revealing a society which is increasingly accustomed to feeling cheated; a society that has no greater objective than mere appearances, where the price of goods reflects the high cost of marketing and promotion. And neither has the art world escaped this trend; it has its very own specialists to convince potential buyers that their interest in certain pieces of work shows great taste and sensitivity to culture. These sculptures are unlikely to match the three piece suite or the wallpaper, with that "discreet charm of the bourgeoisie"; in Brito's work, sublimity can be showy, and the acquisition of one of his pieces does not save the buyer.

Above all, Sergio Brito loves to provoke, and with great boldness he continually challenges devotees, mystics and moralists, the authentic and convinced,



Sergio Brito. *La Isla de Nunca Jamás*, 1997. Plastic, metal and lights.

defendants and attackers. His work has no better victim than those who believe in a redeeming art and no more appropriate fate than the hypocrisy and arrogance of a society riddled with vanity, which shows not the slightest interest in reflecting upon this 'spectacle', these excesses to which it has accustomed us. Brito's work retains an experimental touch which enables him to redefine the spaces and domains of art. His installation consisting of several wreaths placed on their side with space between them, each attached to strings of flashing colored lights, reflects a "non-artistic" reality by recreating an atmosphere reminiscent of brightly lit streets during the holiday season, particularly at Christmas, when town councils and businesses go wild with fantasy and money so as to turn the streets into spectacles of light and color. Streets are closely linked to our concept of reality and have great presence in our everyday lives. This installation enables spectators

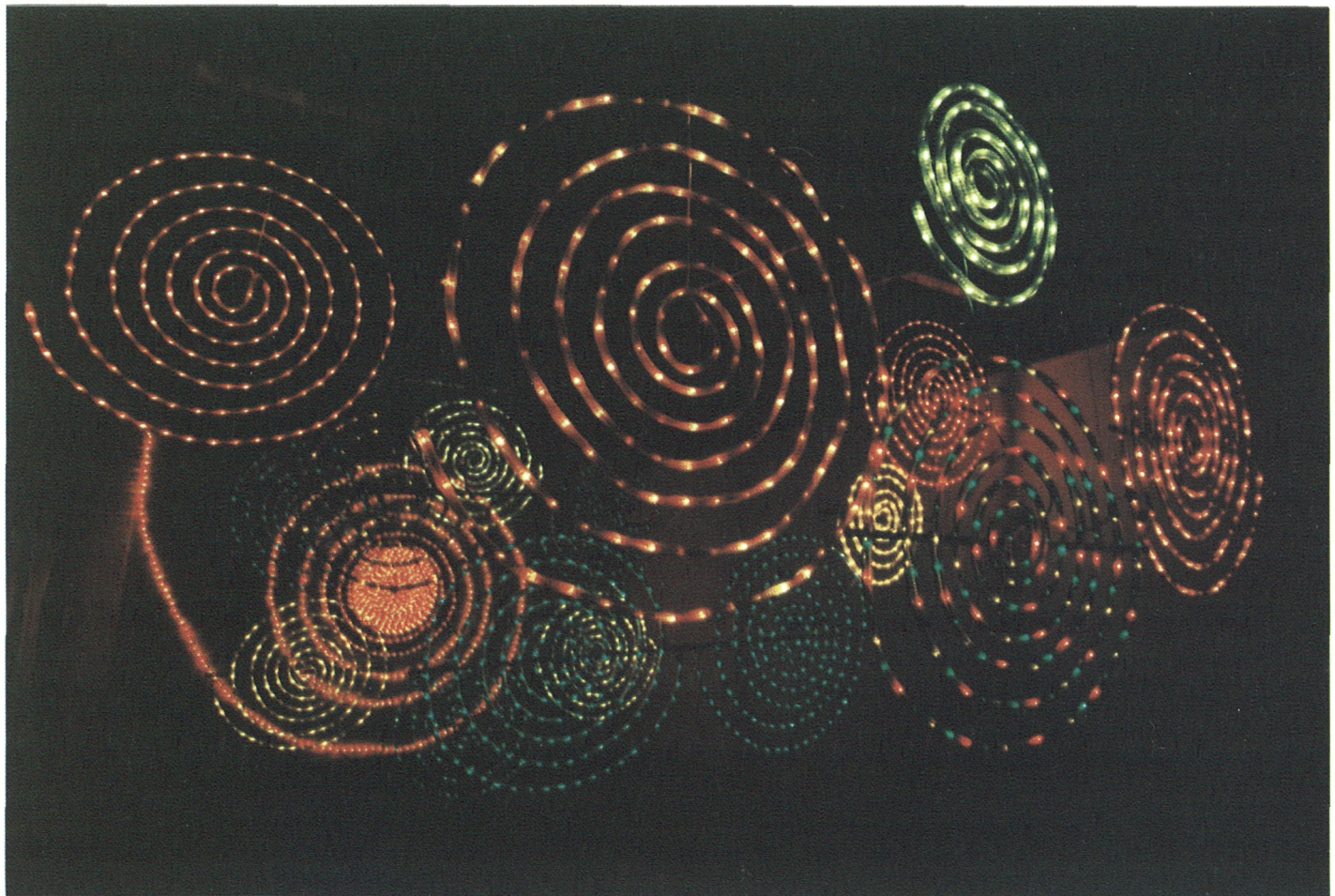
to participate actively by means of a mechanism which records the noise they make while moving around the gallery and their comments while viewing the piece; these sounds then interfere with the rhythm of the flashing lights. The installation was designed to encourage viewers to walk around it, to appreciate the different spatial relations resulting from the ever-larger illuminated spirals, which cover more and more floor space and reach up towards the ceiling, enveloping us in their luminous presence. The shape linking all the wreaths is a spiral; Brito recreates the transcendence of this symbol, which has formed part of cultural expression since the beginning of time. In this piece, he reflects on the superficiality and luxury which is omnipresent in our society as a whole, and in the world of culture and contemporary art. This is not without an element of heresy in a place such as the Canary Islands, where the spiral is regarded as a symbol of national identity.

On the illuminated column, the number of glasses coincides with the seven Canary Islands. This cold, hermetic sculpture is based on the idea of the Canaries as a single, compact block; Sergio Brito casts an ironic glance at the pride felt by many Canary Islanders in belonging to what they perceive as one great island made up of the union of seven. Rather than investigating the mythology or native legends of the Canary Islands, Brito has chosen to look at contemporary society and the banality of all displays of provincial pride among the inhabitants of any land. In so doing, he presents the paradoxical power of images, which are entirely lacking in content but come across with great visual force. Since 1995, much of Brito's work has revolved around the place where he

lives and works; it looks at his cultural identity, seeking a meaningful space through which to talk about his place of origin, and ironizing about the recent regionalist phenomenon of returning to our roots.

In his series *Síndrome de Peter Pan*, Brito continues to study the concept of "collective identity" which is upheld by most nationalist and populist parties: one of the most serious threats to democracy's protection of tolerance and coexistence. As part of an often invented folklore, many myths and symbols of traditional Canary Island identity are being recuperated by people who believe they possess the absolute truth about a range of subjects which affect us all. In his piece *Canarias naturaleza cálida*, a Mario Merz-style igloo consisting of

numerous inflatable smiley sunshines, Brito recreates the mighty sun which attracts countless tourists to the Canary Islands. The fine weather blessing the islands all year round inspires foreigners to flock to our beaches and lie around in the sun; it is also the greatest source of income for these lucky islands. Sergio Brito is well aware that the brightest star in the solar system is like a god which everyone worships in order to prevent the economy collapsing, and to maintain the status quo. As a result, he has recreated this provocative artificial sun consisting of many smaller suns which goes beyond the limits of "prudence" and enters the difficult terrain of excess and ostentation in order to show what is offered in a few small Atlantic islands off the north-west coast of Africa.



Sergio Brito. *Untitled*, 1995. Installation, 400 x 400 x 1.100 cm.

Bananas are another of the most popular symbols of Canary Island identity. Remember “Guanchito” the giant banana, who toured Spain (in a promotional campaign run by the Canary Islands Council of Tourism) to encourage mainland Spaniards to visit the Canary Islands? Revealing his critical, highly skeptical attitude to all such marketing phenomena, Brito created two sculptures: *La isla de nunca jamás* and *Independence Day*. Rather than adopting the usual hypocritical attitude of respect for such “traditional” things, the artist questions many of these symbols, and deconstructs the heavenly vision of this earthly banana paradise. *Independence Day* is a huge banana consisting of many smaller inflatable bananas, like those which tourists take home from the Canary Islands as souvenirs. On the one hand, bananas are the islands’ most common fruit, and the root of various expressions coined to describe an easy-going approach to life. Whereas elsewhere in Spain a person who has their head in the clouds is said to be *atontado*, in the Canary Islands he is *aplatanao* [literally “banana-ed”]. The Canary Island surrealist poet Pedro García Cabrera tackled this subject in 1930, saying that “this *aplatanamiento* [state of being banana-ed] is the most hazardous, most disastrous common state which a people could possibly invent, in which to do absolutely nothing. It is an excuse for all kinds of laziness. It shirks all sense of responsibility. People hide behind it to elude all accusation of passivity. The energy of the people is buried beneath it”. On the other hand, Brito has also reinterpreted Andy Warhol’s famous painting of a banana (chosen, among other things, for its phallic connotations), ridiculing the typically provincial attitude of those who seek to find common ground

between fashionable modernity and local customs and images. Recently, the powers-that-be have backed the recuperation of a whole range of customs and traditions which had fallen into disuse, and are now upheld as being essentially “ours”. Sergio Brito exasperates us with this sculpture by creating one huge banana out of the imprisonment of countless other bananas; he makes the greatest banana of all, the super-banana, the hero of bananas, the star of all fruits, the symbol of *aplatanamiento* and of a whole trend in banana-nationalist politics and, to top it all, it is also modern because Andy Warhol worshipped it.

Contemporary art is characterized by the fact that it lacks a single way of interpreting life and the world around us; it is more about personal experiences, incoherent trajectories and a lack of ideological conviction, which makes for a weak philosophy in comparison with the great dogmas besetting turn-of-the-century artists. In most of the pieces in this series, Sergio Brito reflects on recent developments in the art world; unable to rid itself of models from the past, contemporary art appears to have no way forward other than reinterpreting them. Brito uses these circumstances to create art with considerable visual and material presence. Without prejudice, he inhabits the different artistic languages of the last 40 years; at the same time, he has a great ability to give his work a very personal touch, which is not an easy achievement when coherence is generally not a starting point but a space of reference. Brito manipulates the imagery of Pop art and crosses the borderlands of Conceptual and even Minimal art; he becomes the prototype multiple trajectory artist, while maintaining the personal style that makes him easily recognizable regardless of the

terrain he treads. In his piece *¿Pero Roy, esto es arte?*, a giant illuminated sandwich wonders (as in Roy Lichtenstein’s vignettes) about the direction which art has taken in the post-modern era, with more than a touch of humor. Years ago Vattimo commented on the way that increasing aesthetics in everyday life have reduced the realm of art. This crisis of values has become widespread, and thinkers such as Baudrillard assure us that today the only magic in art is that of its disappearance, in a gradual process of erosion produced by the countless plays of references. Within this context, innovation becomes increasingly difficult and some artists therefore believe that the only remaining option is to employ de-contextualized references from the past.

One of Brito’s most disconcerting pieces is *Europín*, evocative of Jasper Johns’s American flag, in which a flag made of inflatable superman dolls blows as testimony to an era which is in danger of extinction. Superman, the great hero of masculine values, he who safeguards Western achievements and excellence, now has no better use than as a child’s plaything, to while away the hours. This flag of fair, strong and honest men who never lie, defenders of humanity who fight for the weak and lost causes, also personifies the supranational state, modelled on the USA, which Europeans are trying to create in the old continent. The hero of American comics is losing his footing at a time when feminism has questioned the role of men and women in society. *Europín* is a sort of burlesque caricature consisting of ridiculous supermen who would deflate at the prick of a pin; superheroes made of pollutant, non-biodegradable plastic, pathetic in their attempt to represent the idealized male role.