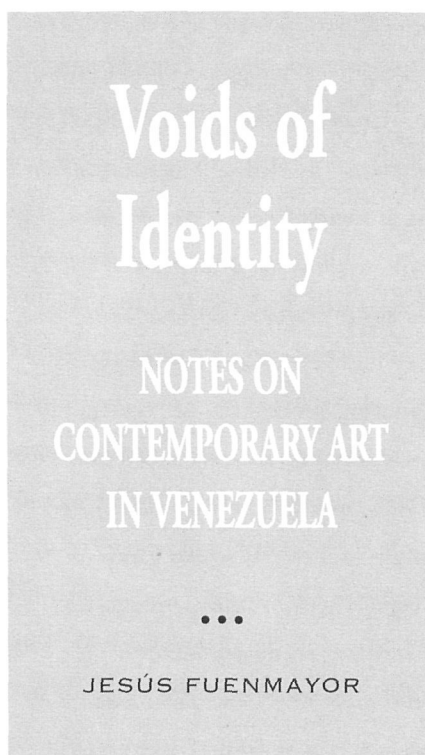


Perhaps one of the most underrated (and therefore least studied) recent works of art is a series of self-portraits by the Venezuelan artist Meyer Vaisman, created in the midst of the ever-changing styles of the '80s. They are not properly self-portraits, in the sense that Vaisman appropriated a caricature made by a street artist at the exit of the Ufizzi Gallery, and then inserted it in several of his works (which, taken together, make up the *Coin's* series). Seen in the context of the art of the time, perhaps this work simply adds fuel to the debate about systems of circulation, representation and the problems of authority all of which were so much in fashion then. However, seen in the light of Vaisman's most recent production, a re-evaluation is possible. The former context could have more to do with a trend that has alternately been superimposing itself and creating subtexts throughout the work of several other young Venezuelan artists, and which coincides with some of the most outstanding aspects of the legacy of Armando Reverón. Bárbaro Rivas, Jesús Soto and Gego, masters of the affirmation of identity in the void (we might recall here that Reverón painted what the light did not let him see, that Rivas, who was mistakenly classified as a primitive, represented multiple personalities in his images while eroding them with his experiences as



man in the street, that Soto aspired to nothing more than the fruitless search for immateriality and that Gego came closest to revealing the very structure which creates space). Within this historical grouping, we could talk of a shattered identity in constant evolution. This is one of the sub-plots which served as a catalyst for the custody presented by María Luz Cárdenas and Luís Angel Duque in an exhibition of young Venezuelan art held in 1995, particularly in one section they called *Fractures of the Self*, which included a large part of the most interesting work currently being produced in Venezuela.

What Vaisman's self-portraits could suggest then, as he himself has already expressed, is a void of meanings which inevitably leads us to an abyss of identity in which there is not only

one single answer (and perhaps no answer at all), to the question of who we are: in other words, a sort of level zero of existence. This is how Vaisman's recent work is structured, through an icon, the *rancho*, which inevitably ends up betraying itself in the "self-portrait" oppressively carried inside him (a burden which is depicted in the bedroom inside the *rancho* where the artist lived as a teenager).

This void of identity is also present in the dual condemnation meted out by José Antonio Hernández-Díez on that well-known character of present-day mythology, *Houdini* (1989); that is, the condemnation of the echo of his own inexorable destiny, as well as that of art. In this installation Hernández-Díez poses (on video) as the master of escapism in his famous last scene, in such a way that the distant relationship between the artist and mythology is clear. However, beyond the exchange of personalities, Hernández-Díez has opened another door: that of a different condemnation (which is another way out, despite being a condemnation), the flight towards the fictitious and alternate reality of art. In this work of art, a monitor submerged in a fish tank projects the video of Hernández-Díez as Houdini, whose escape would then lead not to an exit but to the paradoxical perpetuation of submission

to an identity which, being mythical, does not belong to him. Instead, it belongs to the crowd whose wishes are in unison at that moment: the thrill of the escape, which becomes a metaphor for repression. The reference to Houdini is of great importance. He is a character of our times, a legend that belongs to all of us just as much as the Eiffel Tower or the Statue of Liberty, a myth woven into the same cloth of modernity which has now supposedly become history. *Houdini* is also a piece that anticipates the artist's current work. Continuing with his ideas, his new projects aim to make the reception of his work less scandalous by creating those small bonds of understanding that cause us to hesitate between self-exile and self-colonialism, that pendulum which sways rather heavily with regards to any work categorised as belonging to the artistic production of Latin America. Among this kind of work, we should mention a series of video-assemblages that lie half-way between sculptures and installations. One of them, for example, is a video of a finger moving on toy wheels, projected on a monitor which has been incorporated into the meaning of the piece thanks to a metallic tube going from the floor up to the shelf where the monitor is resting. In *Drag* (1995), both the finger and the tube mock the chauvinistic self-complacency of sub-urban culture. But, just as the construction of the image has

become more oblique or complex in his work (it is no longer possible to guess at referential context straight away), so too can we observe a deconstruction (as in *Houdini*), of certain details which seem insignificant at first glance, like the precarious cardboard structure covering the "identity" of the monitor. This same process can be seen in a sculptural installation called *Indy* (1995), in which four monitors project images of a race in which hands on scooter wheels are competing instead of racing cars. Each monitor is a racetrack where the half-human, half-machine creatures speed away. Each one is also crowned with a *truck* (skateboard wheel) and, just as in *Drag*, the "corporate identity" of the monitor is hidden inside a sculptural device in the form of a table that acts as a base.

In his most recent work, Hernández-Díez extends this idea of erasing himself from the surface of language, of that fusion of avant-garde and vernacular language which had begun to structure his work. Nowadays, with a video of Venezuela's most violent recent popular uprising (*In God We Trust*, 1991), Hernández-Díez denies his public the possibility of entertaining themselves and exempts them from the presence of a dog's corpse (*San Guinefort*, 1991). In his new installations the references have been almost completely displaced, just as in those colonial portraits where clothes, and not faces, were extravagantly detailed.

The pieces consist of a series of minimalist pseudo-furnishings built by the artist, whose only narrative gesture is the addition of the bite-mark of a huge jaw. As in all his work, the base is inseparable from the language. In this series it is almost impossible to separate the image from its base. The image is the bite-mark: there are two of them situated symmetrically on two surfaces covered in Formica, a further bite-mark at the already-ambiguous icon of urban culture: in one triptych the bite-mark seems to have been made by different bodies: one by a person with crooked teeth, another by someone with a few teeth missing, and the third shows some other dental defect. The structure represented in the furnishings points towards a tradition (that of the crisis of modernity). This is invoked not to attack or destroy the tradition but rather to enjoy its agony by means of the apparently harmless gesture of biting. By perpetuating this state of agony, art is granted the extraordinary potential to reveal its own fractures, to build its own imagination, and to inhabit this imagination as an active, pulsating space. (1)

Among all of Hernández-Díez's work, it is perhaps in a series of photographs which have sometimes been related to cultural cannibalism (as well as the bite-mark series) where this baroque process of eliminating individual features can be seen most clearly. These photos show deformed human figures whose origin is quite

difficult to determine. At first glance, it seems that the artist did not want to unveil the process. However, part of the procedure becomes visible, such as the striking colour of the figures that reveals their industrial origin, the uniformly-coloured advertisement backgrounds, and some details of the photographic surface that are excessively out of focus: taken together, all this shows that the figures are out of scale (that is, they have been magnified). By confessional means, Hernández-Díez lets one discover that the figures are in fact children's toys, much like those which are hidden in piñatas at parties. One can also see that the deformation of the figures is a result of both cannibalistic and schizophrenic gestures: his own bite is used by the artist to substitute other more traditional instruments of sculptural carving. By comparing schizophrenia to cannibalism, the piece seems to point as much to the pathology of our own perception as to the external reception of our cultural processes.

Another Venezuelan artist who has explored the limits of identity by means of art's capacity to delve into the essential foundations is Sammy Cucher. One of the first works that could be interpreted in this way is a video installation entitled *Cheshire Cats* (1991), a reference to *Alice in Wonderland*. The installation itself consists of five monitors positioned on very high metal platforms, with a mould of the artist's forearm chained

to each one, and a kind of emblematic figure inscribed like a tattoo on the wrist showing the commercial labels for scanners accompanied by a word associated with the condition of alienation: I DESIRE. ADMIRE. TRUST. ENVY. IMITATE. LOVE. The monitors display videos of the most conspicuous smiles from local television, which alternately appear and disappear. This kind of defence of the disappearance of the self under the dilemma of identity has underlined a large part of Cucher's work. Here we find, for example, works like *Mandala* (1991) in which the artist created an arbitrary photographic inventory of book volumes arranged on the shelves of a library, that space considered (in western culture) to be the centre of universal knowledge. These photos were then displayed on a large wall in such a way that they made up the graphic structure of an eastern model of universal knowledge: the I-Ching. By comparing these two models without giving preference to either one, the artist creates a conflict around the notion that it is possible for two exclusive universal models to co-exist. In another installation, entitled *Dark gleam of essence* (1991) and created in an officiant church in San Francisco, Cucher decided to work with a series of photographs depicting hands in different positions, printing them on translucent sheets and positioning them inside the church in such a way that a spotlight could project the image onto the walls.

Each of these images, in the ritualistic atmosphere in which they were displayed, symbolised a religion (imaginary or real) which, when considered all together, formed a chorus of religions superimposed one over another, where they are one and all simultaneously, a chorus in which the tensions of differences are placed on the same level as those of equalities. Lately, Cucher has been working in collaboration with the American Anthony Aziz. His recent works have received significant attention, particularly a series which began with the installation entitled *Faith, Honour and Beauty*. The strongest impression in this piece is made by images of classically positioned nudes of a hypothetical new race identified by the use of contemporary paraphernalia and by the absence of genitals. This series is followed by another photographic collection grouped under the generic title *Dystopia*, made up of portraits of people whose identity is only precariously preserved due to the fact that the sensory organs connecting us to perceptive reality have been erased in the same way as those in the previous series, i.e. by means of digital manipulation. In the words of María Luz Cárdenas: "With these portraits we find ourselves in front of faces that challenge the classical patterns of identity and dislocate the structures which hold them up like conceptual architecture, faces that inhabit an infinite space of topological connections where the impossibility of recognising definite features leaves the

field open for a permanent 'return-to-sender' to the dismantled identity". (2)

Finally, I would like to include the outstanding works of José Gabriel Fernández in this brief overview. A chronicle of the forbidden glance could be traced through some of his installations, including one using slide projections, presented in 1985, and called *Che dolce cosa* after the famous words of Piero della Francesca. In this installation, the central formal element is the cone of vision. The cone of vision, which delighted the Renaissance, here becomes the crucifixion of the eye. The installation actually consists of two slide projectors, a platform and an action by the artist. One of the projectors shows an arch which insinuates classical perspective; the other depicts a progression of images of the artist which simulate movement from the background to the foreground. Simultaneously the action takes place, where Fernández can be seen lifting a cone from the platform and inverting the axis from its natural horizontal position to a vertical one. This cone is constructed by means of strips which come out of a circle inscribed in the platform and lead to a nail in the rectangle of wall-space where the previously mentioned images are being projected. When the sequence of slides has concluded, the projected image of the artist becomes life-size and is held just at the point where the nail and the eye finally coincide. In 1991 Fernández created an installation in

which he revised the myth of Narcissus. It is a hermetic piece made up of different sculptural elements of obvious connections and constructive will. In it, formality appears to be concealed by the language of the contextualists. The spectator is positioned in front of an object which rests passively on the floor. The piece is made of an aluminum structure which is in turn covered with a steel mesh. This mesh reproduces one of the effects of water; opacity. Depending on our point of view, the mesh seems either solid or translucent. Despite being echoed by very few elements (because the artist refers to it obliquely) the well which recreates the myth of Narcissus is present as a subject that refuses to reflect our image, forcing our scrutinising gaze to invert its course. Another permutation in Fernández's work is to be found in the unexpected encounter of political statements – political proclamations, if you will – with allegorically conjugated historical traditions. This is particularly noticeable in his most recent work. One of them is called *Boceto para una Historia Natural del Edén* (1993-94). It is both an installation and a series in which he fuses Pliny and the Bible with the sexual politics of space. In keeping with Fernández himself, this piece talks of the exclusion of homo-erotic sexuality from Paradise. As in most of his work, this piece consists of several elements which define its presentation. A tapestry paper of floral motifs is mixed with graffiti from men's toilets and a cone of transparent

acrylic, thus reminding us that the politics of space have been and will always be linked to the construction of sexual identity. In another recent work, *Los Celibes (Toreros)* (1993), the artist concentrates on the figure of the bullfighter as an archetype of masculinity in which traditional aspects of masculinity are constructed. *Los Celibes (Toreros)* is made up of various light-boxes of galvanised metal in which images of bullfighters in full action and of anal penetrations can be seen, harmonised by the glow of the light-bulb inside the box. Traditional bullfighting is used by Fernández to examine how the representation of masculine heterosexuality is constructed on a stage full of homo-erotic symbolism. All the metamorphoses of identity put forward by these artists are closely linked to a being who, while mutating, forebodes disappearance; it is a disappearance that, carried out through contagion, we may never witness.

NOTES

- [1] In an article by Luis Pérez Oramas (El Nacional, August 1996) about the 19th century painter Arturo Michelana, the most famous Venezuelan painting *Miranda en la Carraca* is discussed in these same terms regarding the insistence in our aesthetic tradition on using art's capacity to perpetuate states of agony. In this sense, *Houdini* could be regarded as the *Miranda en la Carranca* of our time.
- [2] María Luz Cárdenas, *El rostro Perfecto para un lugar difícil*, Sammy Cucher, *Dystopia*, XLVI Venice Biennial, Venezuelan Pavillion, 1995.