

REVIEWS

AIDS is the illness of postmodernism. Apart from computer viruses - which signify terrorism taken to incalculable extremes of exquisiteness and profit- no other epidemic in this century has driven humanity to such a high level of *sophisticated fear*. Both viruses, human and computer immunodeficiency, have become menacingly ubiquitous phenomena, not only because the attack is virtually invisible, but also because the bombardment of information about them has created a "boundary of the illness" where both the ill and the healthy cohabit, be it people or computerised programmes. Lacking their own identity, these viruses are disguised, and in function of a frightening propaganda, manage to have the mass media at their beck and call. But AIDS goes beyond that within this boundary of common terror and expectation, exploring the division between the ill and the healthy, creating a sect, and therefore generating a policy, and, of course, a culture. In this way it reflects the most critical edges of this era.

AIDS recycles (quote) archaic diseases which have supposedly disappeared. It is destructive, inclusive, and even retroactive if we understand that its attack on each person unchains a series of links towards the past (all previous sexual contacts) dissolving any notion of the present for an individual who can not define the scale of the illness.

AIDS sets the mold for the apocalyptic enunciations of the end of the millennium. It is therefore one of the best pretexts for the art of this era, which boasts of being akin to the marginal, the political and the spectacular. AIDS is *death turned into a spectacle through massive warning campaigns of public*

The Syndrome of Postmodernism

Recent work of
Fernando Arias
Gaviria

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EUGENIO VALDÉS

demonstrations performed by those affected by the illness and by "risk" groups, through the public agony of rock groups, movie stars and famous athletes or through works of art.

Art that deals with the issue of AIDS is among the variants that are searching for a re-valorisation of the marginal within contemporary culture. The identification of AIDS with the marginal has to do with the reality of contamination, of something contagious. The contagiously ill were historically discriminated against, set apart from healthy social groups. Having abruptly hit the gay community, this discrimination is redundant. The ethical justification of *homosexual discrimination was replaced* by an apparently stronger argument, a *clinical-hygienic controversy*. What really occurred was a mythical process, a search for an explanation of for the unexplainable that eventually presented

the disease as something allegorical. It represents an allegory of pleasure and pain, of sin and punishment. Just as with any mystification, this of course contains ethical and ideological content.

Because there is still a dark cloud surrounding the disease — its true origin is still unknown — it is understandable that the myth which stigmatises gays remain, even though other forms of contamination are a fact, even heterosexual relationships. The most immediate response was a re-organisation of the homosexual group, a first impulse of physical withdrawal that defined their territorial boundaries (more like a retreat caused by panic) and a second impulse of ideological development, in which there is already a proposed rejection of this triple quality as an object of alienation, exhibition and fascination.

Art on AIDS is at the service of this ideological development (not only because it may appear to be brimming with connotations on gay rights, but also because it tends to break that fatal bond between disease and sexual preference), and consequently rids us of the myth surrounding this disease. It is an art that attempts to eliminate the aura of fascination and absurdity attributed to all myths. Thus its objective, documental and artificial characteristic.

Análisis, the first work of Fernando Arias Gaviria (Colombia, 1963) that deals with the AIDS issue is already presented as an abstraction, not only in the visual sense, which turns the work into a "pure" text, but primarily in the ideological sense, threatening the notion of identity. The blood test platelets the artist uses as basic material are substituting individuals. The numbers and the blood traces staining the platelets are

constituted in shapes of identification, storage and control. The artistic space therefore acquires a clinical appearance where the subject is diluted in the act of the analysis.

This clinical environment translates the hospital into a space of power; in other words, of repression, enclosure and alienation. Upon reaching the laboratory, the patient ceases to be an autonomous subject and is reduced to a series of symptoms, a semiotic system shut into a circle of causes and effects. Beyond this circle, the “patient” has no meaning; and vice versa, the clinical space does not have the same implications for the healthy human being. A healthy person shut-up in a hospital is an aberration.

The healthy and the ill only share the terror they experience when confined to a hospital space. When dealing with AIDS, the laboratory becomes the ante-chamber of the hospital: it is to the hospital what the jury is to jail, a place for analysis where others start to decide for (and about) oneself.

As in most of Gaviria’s work, in *Análisis* space works as characterisation, as a dramatised element provided with a personality that influences the viewer’s reaction. In this type of work the artistic subject-object relationship is fulfilled through penetration, transit and travel, which somehow reproduces the vital circle of the universe. These are not works to be looked at; one enters them and becomes involved. It represents the virtual possibility of entering and leaving the space of illness.

This effect is intensified through the use of a photographic image. The installation takes over the entire space of the gallery (Museo de Arte, Universidad Nacional, Bogotá), whose walls are covered with enlarged macrophotographs scattered with laboratory platelets, creating the illusion of standing before



Análisis (detail), 1992. Installation. National University, Bogota.

microscopic photographs. Repetition and disproportion tend to oversize the visual structure of the photographs. This causes a substitution of the object of analysis (the virus) for the social phenomenon in which the illness is enclosed (the circumstances of contagion). What the viewer sees are not really photographs of microorganisms but fragments of the human body with a broad tactile functionality: there are 500 photographs of a masculine masturbation confronting — a fatal separation — another panel also covered with 500 photographs, but in this case of vaginas. Both panels create a visual and interpretive tension that reinforces the idea of monologue and isolation. The sense of the work thus has a tends towards contact as a fundamental concept. The illusion of visual contact with the virus is important, as is the parable that is springs up around the idea of contact as a means of contagion and solitude as an hygienic means of pleasure.



Por lo que más quiera...use condom, 1994. Installation. Variable sizes. Project for Atlántica

Hence the rejection of contact that the installation inspires.

In *Cuarto frío* (1993) we experience the same feeling of rejection. The work consists of a container, open on both sides, within which a sort of hypostyle room is reproduce. There are dozens of columns made out of laboratory platelets. The columns are lighted from the inside with tubes of black light. Their arrangement is such that they impede transit, and the viewer is obliged to dodge and feint in order to avoid contact. There is a sort of repulsion caused by these platelets with blood samples. In this context the blood is an aggressive element, since it represents the virus’s habitat. It is also the substitution of the individual. With the rejection of this element, the public is reproducing within the artistic space society’s rejection of the AIDS patient. But it is also responds to a stimulus rooted in the history of art itself: the taboo of contact between the public and the artistic object. The work of art in the museum becomes a simultaneously attractive and repulsive object. These contemplative intentions were already announced in *Análisis*. In *Cuarto frío*, the attraction becomes a morbid stimulus. Arias Gaviria thus introduces the provocative element in his work. With this provocation he forces the taboo and attacks the paradigms of the modern artistic object.

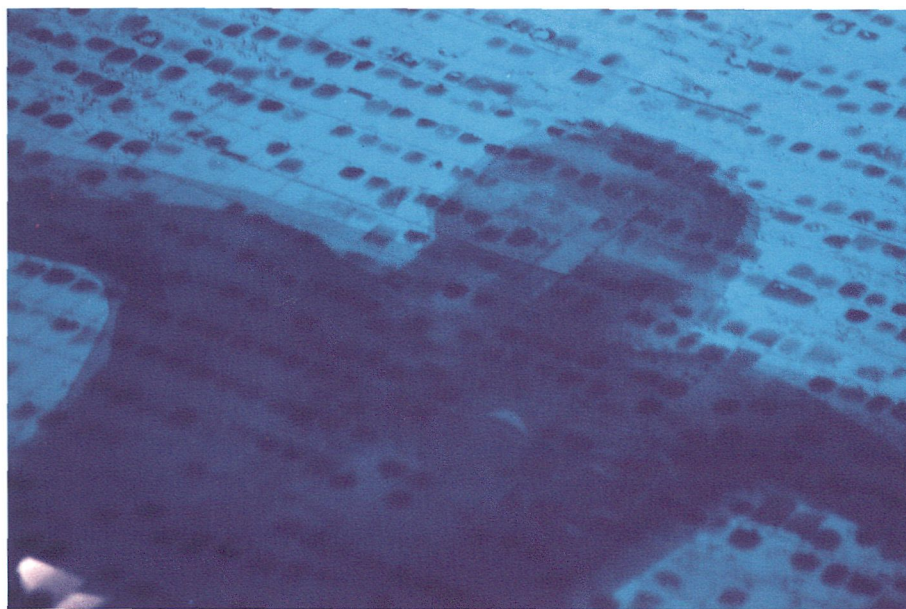
The precedent to *Análisis* must be considered in the same way. At the back of the gallery-laboratory the artist had placed a bidet and a glass cross. The hygienic object caps the clinical, domestic and hygienic allusions with a subtle Duchampian reference. But it acquires connotations of negation or opposition. From the Colombian artist’s perspective, Duchamp’s urinal can be vaguely seen as a demanding and phallic object, while the bidet suggests something feminine and passive.

Whereas in *Análisis* Gaviria blended the connotations of the hospital and the museum as spaces of power, in *Cuarto frío* the artist builds a location within the Museum, a museum within a museum, representing simulated artistic space. Together with the reflection on the illness, the reflection on art itself is maintained. Thus the work presents itself as an allegory of the decadence of art and the reactionary disposition of institutions. *Cuarto frío* is not only the space of the alienated due to illness; it is also the elitist space of art, with the phallic tyranny of the columns. Like the markers in a museum hall, the installation is something added, artificial and bothersome, an obstacle in the space to be viewed. It is also a different dimension in time and space. Entering the work means leaving the museum and entering the space of the museum's representation; the opposite process occurs upon leaving. A transition has been carried out from one level of reality to another and from one level of concealment to another. The sensation of freedom is an illusion.

Seropositivo (1994) is a work that consists of two translations. The first was shown at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá. A larger-than-life photographic self-portrait of the artist was placed below floor level; onto this image a transparent coating of laboratory platelets was placed. The entire surface is lit by a fluorescent light. Video monitors placed on the floor showed spermatozoid in movement.

As with Fernando Gaviria's other works on the issue, in this work there is an absence of rigid boundaries between the concepts of life and death. They are both fatally linked. The live virus symbolises death, the condom that prevents death through contamination also frustrates the possibility of creating a new life. The spermatozoid that appear in

the video are representations of life in a pure condition, but on them weighs the mystery of the disease. It is a metaphor for the battle for survival. In the second translation (shown in one of the chambers of the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña during the 5th Bienal de La Habana, 1994) the artist preferred to



Seropositivo, 1994. Installation (detail), Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogotá.

dispense with the video images. The work gained in synthesis and impact, concentrating all the attention onto the recumbent body over which the blood of many other individuals is a physical weight. The image was truly dramatic, achieving total dominion of its space.

The unusual position of the artistic image in this work demands a different reaction from the spectator. The viewer is drawn down, forced to bend his knees almost as if bowing. We are faced again with something sacred, only this time without sacrilegious intentions.

There is a true reclaim of humility, but this time without the overwhelming frigidity of *Análisis* and without the premeditated oppressive effects of *Cuarto frío*. The humility of the individual in the previous works was imposed by

environments that enlarged the symbols of contamination into menacing elements. The space in *Seropositivo* is an area of redemption. If *Análisis* was a reproduction of a clinic, *Cuarto frío* was the representation of the morgue, whereas *Seropositivo* imitates a sanctuary. But the objective of *Seropositivo* was not to place

the viewer in front of a religious situation, but rather to place him before his own ethical responsibility. This is a work that deals with the issue of AIDS from a humanitarian perspective, unearthing the moral question that underlies civilisation's relation to nature. Modernisation of life has not sufficed to preserve postmodern existence. But the most important issue is not that both machine and the individual are exposed to a destructive virus, but that the virus is exposing society's moral crisis.

The works of Fernando Gaviria therefore offer a reading of postmodernism as a syndrome of contemporary society, where the fundamental pathology is based in the daily recycling of sterile pleasure, paranoia, alienation and contagion.