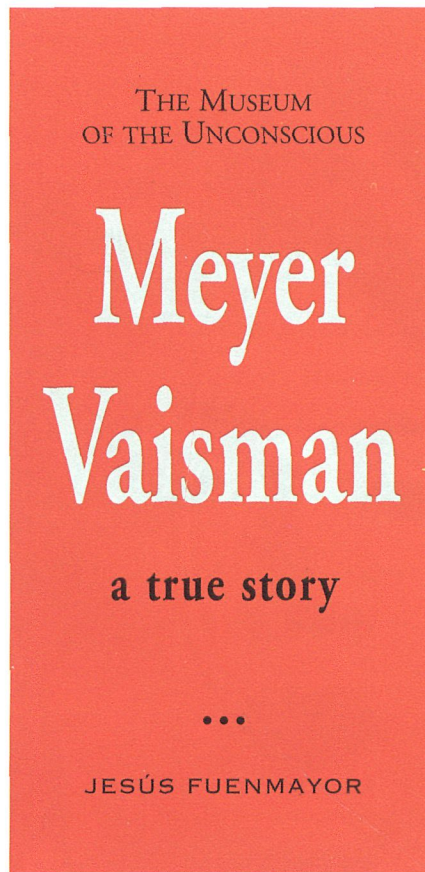


"...as white men we had the opportunity to renounce the identity that we were sure to possess..." Vito Acconci.

Only a few artists can see their work untainted by criteria that have been imposed as a result of a recent kind of ethnographic determinism currently in vogue. The case of Meyer Vaisman is a further, even stranger exception to this rule, taking into account that he is a Latin American artist, and what's more, (probably useless for most), from Venezuela. We can count those artists, from this geographical area that have managed to attract international attention, if indeed they do exist, without being categorically included in a mentality bent on setting limits to their assumed idiosyncrasy. Such methodology, to be true, quite estranged from the historical and contemporary reality that marks us here, would analyze Vaisman's work as a bland product submitting to the dictates of the principal distribution circuits of avant-garde art, or at best, as one of its exclusive protagonists. To this prejudice, Vaisman's work has replied with creations of evident ironic tone, tragicomic to be more exact, among which we can recall a work that he presented at the Salon of the Premio Mendoza, the most relevant art venue held in Venezuela since a decade ago. Held in 1992, Vaisman presented on this occasion a work that seems to be



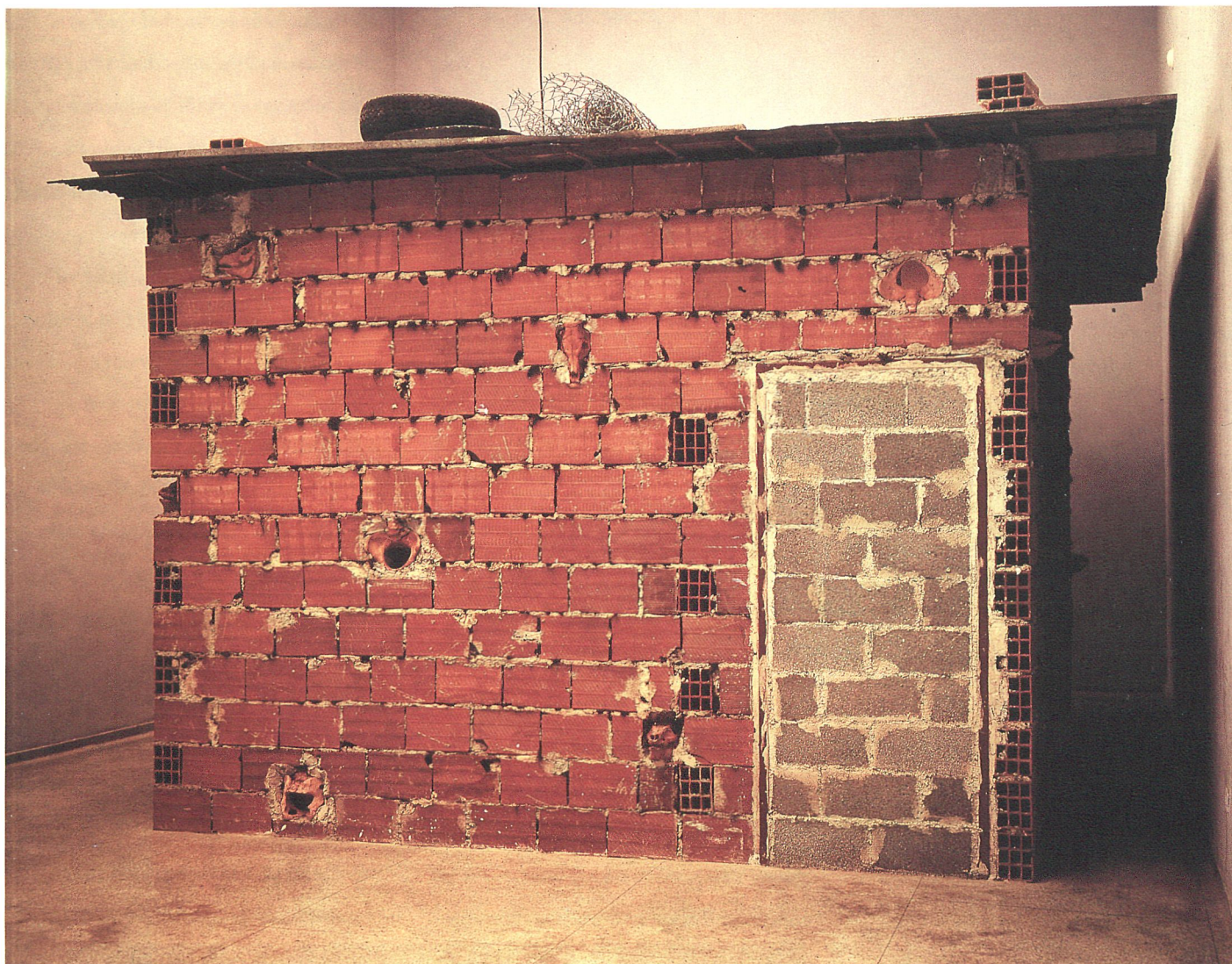
literally the outcome of one of those Caraqueño children stories that the artist has so often tapped in his art. The work was a kind of evolutionary story of the species, beginning with the egg, (or rather the egg-shell broken in two), going on to a new born, stuffed chick together with a hen dressed up as a rabbit and pompously attired in a kimono, and then a skeleton model for pathological classes, finishing with what should be the mortal remains of a young rabbit.

This natural history of the species can be compared with another work no less tragicomical, that is also based on the

artist's childhood. Vaisman says that as a child he was taken to a small but very fashionable Caracas fair ground with his friends where they sold little chicks painted in artificial colours. These chicks were then brought home as the day's great reward, to be transformed some time after, and no doubt in part due to the chemicals of the artificial colour, into creatures belonging to Dr. Frankenstein's imagination.

It is both pertinent and convenient to remember that Vaisman has always played on the traditional notions of the artist's role in society. From his pseudo-paintings (works that imitate to the smallest detail the most universal rules of painting yet applied to the dimension of their own pictorial fiction) to a proto-performance (as a barrel-organist and his monkey that substitute the artist's physical presence) and the artist transvesticized into art gallerist (or vice-versa), Vaisman hasn't stopped insisting on the double spiral of fiction and reality formed by artistic practice. In one of his paintings that is extremely illustrative of my idea, Vaisman used as canvas, the magnified artificial fibre of the tapestry that he became identified with at one point to exhibit his surname. However, his surname is distorted, it appears as Vaismen instead of Vaisman, white men as opposed to white man, a play on words that would





Meyer Vaisman. *Verde por fuera, rojo por dentro*. Installation in Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas. 1993.

have incriminated the artist directly had it been denounced.

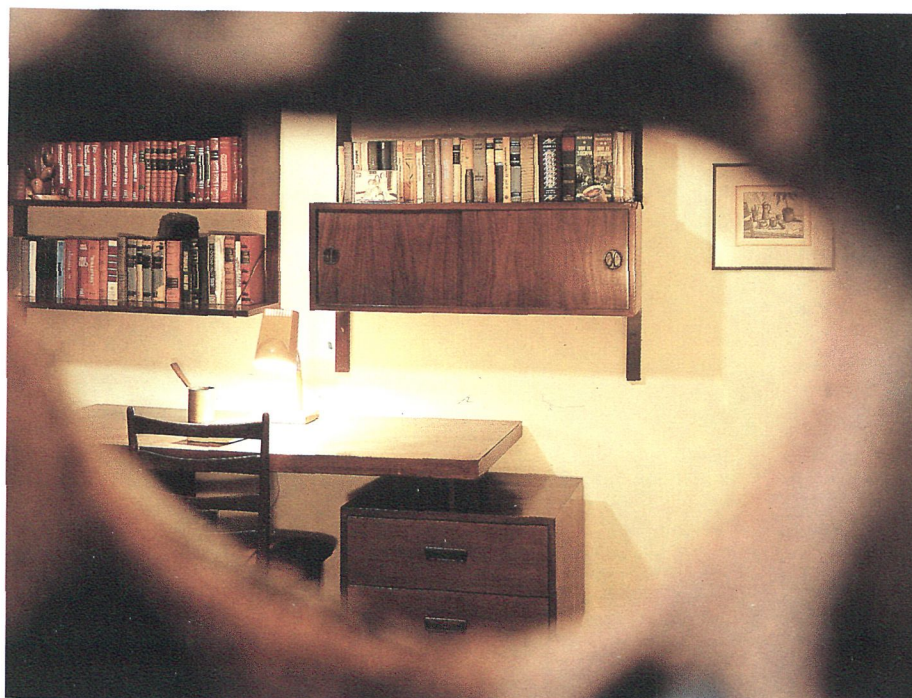
Vaisman, an artist always interested in the problems of identity and its crises in the contemporary world, has recently made a work that has been locally criticized using the borrowed language of multiculturalism. Several have interpreted it as a politically correct work. “Verde por fuera, rojo por dentro”, (Green outside, red inside), presented in the collective exhibition CCS-10/Arte Venezolano Actual, at the

National Art Gallery, (October-January 1993-94) occupied a whole room of the museum and consisted of a popular housing unit for the working classes better known as a “rancho” (traditionally built with the minimum building materials available), where his own room as a child and adolescent in Caracas is perfectly recreated.

Vaisman introduces a double narrative structure, that of the artist’s own autobiography and another one that is trapped in an undefined area of the

unconscious, that the room inside the rancho refers to and which in turn simultaneously alludes to and tries to intersect the other presumably more truthful area (if there is an icon that can truly symbolize the purest slice of Venezuelan contemporary reality, then we would choose almost certainly the “rancho”). This narrative in part serves to construct or recreate an apparently suppressed story, blurred at the start of his career. It helps us to distinguish the events that were crucial in his decision to become an artist, and to identify





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certain characteristics that dispel any doubts regarding his authenticity. It is in the verification of a tale that appears manifestly suspicious, to say the least, that other fiction of the unconscious emerges, where the features that really shape this work are determined (if it is at all possible to know exactly what reality is in such a slippery dimension).

To corroborate this double fiction (more specifically the content of the work that concerns us, which also underlies all of Vaisman's production), Freud can help us by giving an analogy that is not all that foreign to the public condition of this proposal: archaeology and psychoanalysis. An analogy that was fundamental and at times strategic for Freud, just as in Vaiman's case is the transparency of his own biographical memories as artist.

In the case of "Green inside, red outside" the museum is the ideal setting for the exhibition of archaeological objects that have suddenly been unearthed from a past that was thought not to exist. For that reason, the work appears as respectful of the museum's rules. Access to this space, for example, occurs fundamentally at visual level, as a slit between two female clay thighs that prize apart the clay blocks that make up the four impenetrable walls of the rancho. In the construction of this architectural element, both in the inner space as well as in the flesh, we can discover some of the ambiguities that create the narrative thread of this story.

Among these ambiguities we find one that lies in the analogy of the flesh itself, which isn't entirely coincidental, for in the clues offered to us in that invitation

to believe in the heritage of the vernacular and the individual which the artist seems to be declaring, we can notice that the cement of the joints between bricks has been mixed with hair. Dead cells, relics of the unconscious, hair, presumably forms part of that life story that we all want to and have the right to know: his childhood (that is in fact the favourite analytical period of psychoanalysis). The vast quantity of human hair that had to be gathered, despite its alarming volume (sufficient to stuff, in true nazi style, a couple of comfortable pillows), makes this double fiction easier for us to accept: on one hand, successive prehistoric layers (as Freud called them) of the unconscious, and on the other, though the observer may well visualize a ridiculously long mane of hair, a physiognomical portrait of the first steps in the life of this artist. (The ambiguity at least leads us to a destination, which may simultaneously be indescribable).

We are also given some other clues in order to obtain a better understanding of the stories told on the walls of the room, like a poster of the most popular painting in Venezuela (the equivalent to the Mona Lisa), a portrait of the independentist fighter Francisco de Miranda, painted by our most important nineteenth century painter, Arturo Michelena, whose title is "Miranda en la Carraca". The logics of fiction, in accordance with the story that museums tell us, reminds us that on a very nearby



wall, at a couple of metres or so away, the original of the painting has been exhibited dozens of times (as no permanent space for its exhibition actually exists). The possibility of replacing the original work by its double (a poster fixed on the wall of the typical upper middle class family room which has been the outcome of Venezuela's petrol wealth mirage at its peak), where before we could only gaze at the original, opens one of the doors that take us to this idiosyncratic area that is already beyond the territory of representation (to which Vaisman had accustomed us to), at the other side of our consciousness. Within the museum's specular space, another space where the symbolic patriotism of that painting is banalized not through an appropriationist gimmick, but because that image has transcended the careful limits that the museum tries

to define, similar to the case when we try to define the shapes that have become irreducibly fixed in memory.

What applies to the story of Miranda en la Carraca can be extended to the other objects on the rancho's wall. It isn't a question of attempting to project from an ideological position the recent events that have shaken the country. It is rather a desperate effort, (still in an hypnotic state like fiction), to reconstruct a moment of a life that apparently had been left in suspense. The walls that have incorporated pig heads and female hips don't exist to express in a very vulgar fashion the problems that the average Venezuelan suffers daily. If a reason exists for the hips and pig heads being incrustated in the walls, perhaps it could be the imprint of memory: monsters and

creatures that surround us during childhood. To imagine in the grotesque features of those organic forms the materialization of those terrible shadows that when we were children entered and passed through the walls of our rooms. Except that here they either got bored with being nightmares and became reality or willingly reverted the terms of their fantastic condition.

The museum is the supreme archaeological locus. It is the place where collective memory is reconstructed. The unconscious is the place where individual memory is recreated. The child's room becomes the uterus. The rancho's skin becomes the collective unconscious. Forever divided, the collective unconscious and the individual one are forced to occupy in this artist's vertiginous locus the same position.

The glamorous atmosphere inherited without any significant adaptations of the international style that was intensely projected during the 50's and 60's, seems to want to represent the burden of the unconscious: a slice of life brutally cut out of the formative locus of the fantasies that constitute our essence. A kind of oasis of the unconscious, with all difficulties close by and waiting, like at the very limits where repressed desires form. The illusion of a space where the full blown freedom to be what we want is exactly equivalent to that which we most detest about ourselves.



Meyer Vaisman. *Verde por fuera, rojo por dentro*. Installation in Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas. 1993.