

César Manrique: The game is the message

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Art must be in harmony with life. This is the premise that I want to develop into a theoretical introduction of the meaning of César Manrique's aesthetic intention. What does this invocation of harmony between life and art mean? In the first place one would have to enquire about the significance of the category "life" in the work of Manrique. Life is a synonym of creating nature (*natura naturans*).

Art is a symbolic representation that tends to exalt life in two ways. On one hand as a metonymical figure in his painting, (metonym in his painting refers to how a part of Lanzarote's geography, when emphasized in a painting, alludes to the whole, to the island of Lanzarote and its volcanic landscape); on the other, as spatial play in his architecture, conceiving architecture as imitation of nature, creating the illusion that habitat is a part of the natural world. The pleasures derived from direct communion with landscape ought to be felt before an architectural work; for there is no conflict between the natural and the architectural. Obviously, in order to weave the illusion that architecture is part of the natural world, artifice and imagination must be brought into play. In the long run what counts is the pleasurable sensation that we receive in a space organized as scenic imitation of nature. And such a sensation is not spiritual but immediate and sympathetic. This is the description of an aesthetic effect. In the presence of Manrique's work, pictorial or architectural, we can only experience that blissful sensation that reminds us that we too are part of nature, are nature, are alive.

For the artist who sets the value of art on experience (the case of César Manrique), the creative process is an empirical activity, and not a mental process in the lab, an intellectual

exercise divorced from life. What creative intuition extracts from the empirical observation of nature demands the sacrifice of theoretical reflection.

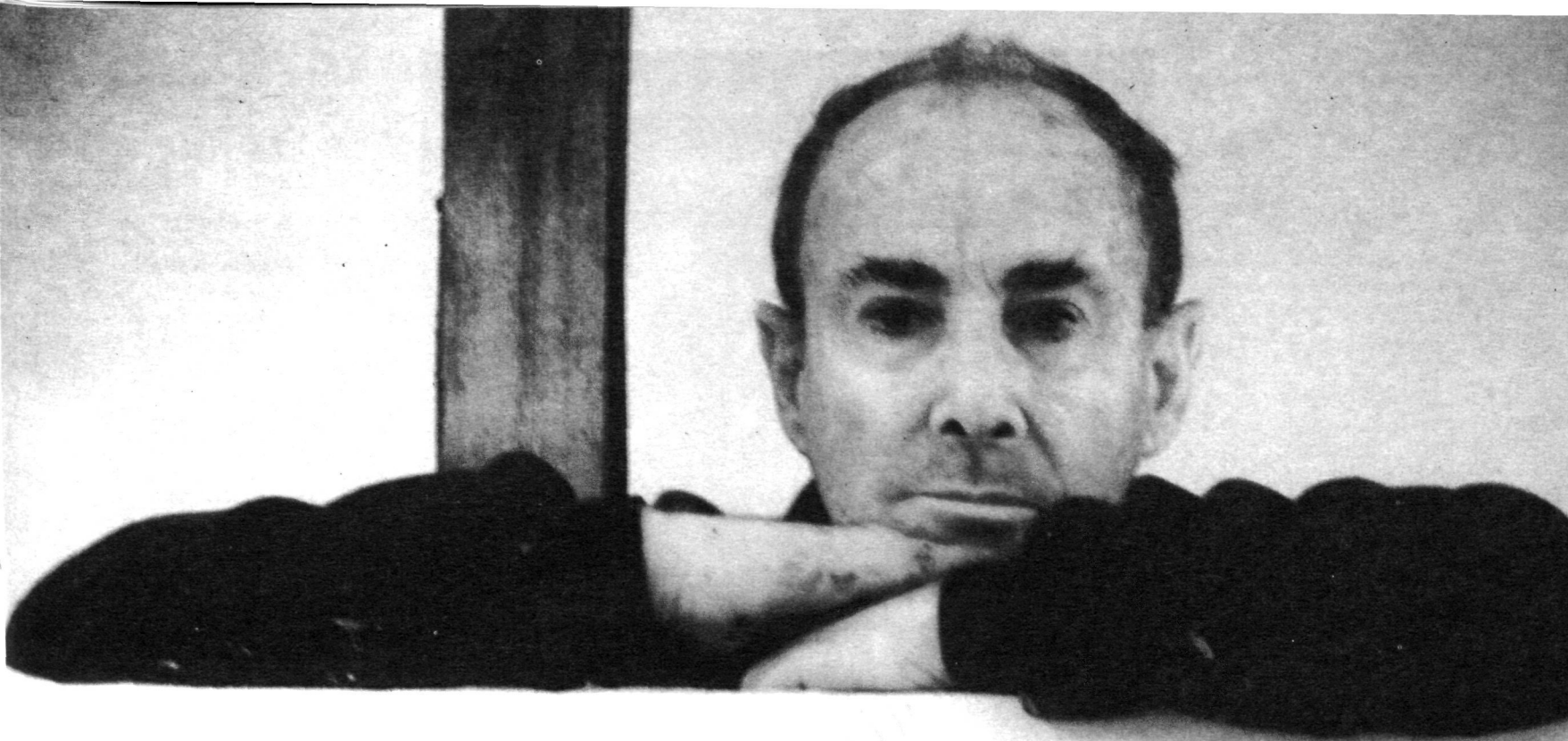
Saving certain exceptions, like Leonardo da Vinci, this is always the case. The merit of Manrique is that in painting, architecture and sculpture, he has created an intuitive and empirical work that has hardly borrowed from theory's rational support, not being the weaker at all for it. The tree of life is green, theory is grey.

In order to achieve the aesthetic impact of vital sensation, and to depict it in works of art that create the empathetic illusion of another more intense, pleasurable and paradisiacal life that truly fulfills us, César has turned his own life into a game. Artistic creation corresponds to the game's impulse; a fundamental aesthetic category that since Schiller has found philosophical reformulation in Marcuse and Gadamer.

The artist who conceives life like a game and as action brings about earthly paradise. Life appears in the art work not as a promise of joy (Stendhal), or as the platonic longing for a "past existence", where only "calm, luxury and voluptuousness" dwell (Baudelaire), but as the fulfillment of that joy in the privileged instant of creative action and aesthetic contemplation; to do and to see are ecstatic experiences. The beauty that art conveys is not a distant promise of joy, it is joy itself. What the work does not give in its "immediacy" can't be given by theoretical mediation come to its aid. The gifts that the game generates as visual delights are experienced presences, real presences.



CESAR MANRIQUE. *Untitled. Mix. Tec./cart. 76×42 cms. 1992.*
Cort. Salas del Arenal. Seville. Junta de Andalucía.



The exaltation of life implies in the artist willing to portray it in his works, an attitude of receptiveness, of humility before the greatness of the natural world. Awe leads to humility. Who is humble stares in wonder. He who feels great in nature, who invokes the power of reason or of technology lacks the capacity of awe. That is why it is said that the artist capable of producing great works of art is like a child awe-struck by the unexpected marvels that life offers. Only the artist who is truly humble in the face of the immensity and the beauty of the exterior world is able in turn to produce wonder in his observers.

For all of this, the work of Manrique implicitly proposes a radical critique not only of the aesthetics of romantic suffering, but also of Adorno's negativistic aesthetic, as it stands and as it is expressed in avant-garde discourse. Yet the attitude he adopts with regards to nature is equally a deep and pertinent critique of the artist's glorified status in the modern world; the artist, with faustian pride, sets up his work, the result of artifice and in some cases of mechanistic superstition, against nature. César wants to collaborate with nature, not compete with her, as some artists and architects of the european avant-garde tradition have done, dazed by the utopian gleam of the industrial world. The artist of modernity sets himself up against nature led by a faustian impulse that accepts no limits to its desire for genial self-assertion, an insatiable desire. The artist's ego is projected as a chimaerical enterprise to which all values must be sacrificed. On the contrary, César presents himself as nature's guardian. I borrow this concept from a celebrated article by Adorno on Heine (*The artist as guardian*, refers to the service rendered by an artist to a social cause). César puts himself at the service of nature. He is at her orders, and listens to her commands attentively. He becomes her interpreter, her guardian.

However, the artist who plays and works, if he is a true artist, does'nt do it as he wishes. The game is not for fun, nor for self-expression; he does so following rules, the rules of the game set down by nature. Once the work has been produced, when the creator has played his first game, following the rules, he generates another social game. When the gifts of creative imagination "spill" onto the work, aesthetic plea-

sure spills over others. The artist transmits his love of nature. Art is a communicative act; and what is communicated isn't a political message or an ethical principle, but the exaltation of life, and as life is a game, the game becomes the meaning.

The empathy that Manrique's work generates isn't a solitary joy, but a shared one. Even when the application of his aesthetics to tourist architecture has produced wealth, this can't be seen in the strict sense of economic profit, as the production of benefit, rather as social welfare. Exchange value and utility value are'nt opposed; the love of nature and the aesthetic pleasure that its contemplation provides are compatible with the controlled development of tourist resources. For the production of wealth, as we well know, has a social dimension.

In a period of crisis for artistic activity, that prevents us from determining what the role of the artist should be in an ever more materialistic and technocratic society, Manrique's aesthetic proposal, that defends the trasgression of the artist as a specialized figure, in order to define the character of the total artist, becomes a proposition that offers creative talent the chance of continuing to render humanity a service.

What does the proposition of total art mean? Firstly, the artist has to put his creative capacity at the service of life. A beautiful environment contribute to producing happiness. The idea of beauty must be refashioned from an ecological perspective. Can there be a renaissance of the idea of the beautiful that stems from a new conception of man's relation with nature? If we accept this premise, we already have the beginning of a new universal dimension of art. We can agree on that point. Painting, sculpture and architecture won't be specialised subjects in a strict sense, but functions of this new universal dimension, whose physical manifestation will be the task of the total artist. In order to interrelate all of these functions, integrating them in nature, organically, the total artist must have the capacities of awe and play. Is this a new naturalist utopia, an inversion of the mechanistic utopia of the avant-garde? May be so, yet in any case, the achievement of this utopia in Manrique's work has'nt produced horror but happiness.