

Capelán: Spirits and texts

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Carlos Capelán is an uruguayan artist exiled in Sweden since the mid-seventies. He was one more of that great influx of political refugees from the southern half of Latin American that reached Sweden in their flight from the military dictatorships in their nations. Many of these immigrants haven't abandoned their exile, and have settled in different parts of Europe. They make up the great migratory trends of recent times, and they have brought into focus the problematic issues of multiculturalism. Although the question of exile, —whether voluntary or not—, has been much discussed on the continent (remember the debate between Julio Cortázar and José María Arguedas), it is impossible to talk about the culture of Latin America without considering the émigrés, mainly in the USA, Europe and within the Latin American continent itself.

Capelán hasn't only created all of his work in Sweden, what's more, it refers to exile and to the build up of identities. Some of his big *environments*, like those created between 1992 and 1993 for presentation in the *Ante América* show in Bogotá, Caracas and New York, constitute real metaphorical treatises on identity and representation in the terminology of contemporary anthropological dialogue. In them he addresses relatively familiar theoretical problems, understandable since his wife is a student of anthropology, but also his own personal diversity, and by extension, Latin America's, from the subjective stand point of a latin american who has experienced utopia and exile.

His work retains an intimate dimension despite his concentration on theoretical based propositions that tend to social and cultural analysis. His recent work emphasizes these aspects, though he continues to develop in the traditional medium of the art gallery and the museum, without developing a more radical perspective that seems to lie at the heart of this poetic core.

The installations of Capelán are very motley atmospheres that the public can visit. The spectator is at first taken aback by a general impression of visual impact, space and atmosphere. But then he will have to move in order to appreciate a tapestry of specific details each one having a significant value in the discourse of a work that establishes multiple levels of communication.

When one literally sinks into any of these environments, you seem to have entered a baroque mexican church of the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The sensation may appear paradoxical, for Capelán's work bears no direct reference to the baroque, and is conceived with a certain visual sobriety that is characteristic of conceptualism, with emphasis placed on ideas, and within the contemporary technique of installa-

tion art. Yet it is choreographed with a sense of spectacle, and appears over ornate both in its general structure and in the teeming detail of microselectivity, in the excessive manner of latin american colonial baroque. The reference is strengthened by a mystical emotivity present in the artist's poetry.

A work like this is ideal to support the theory of the baroque as the aesthetic of art and literature in Latin America, suggested by the cuban writers Alejo Carpentier and Severo Sarduy, which gave rise to numerous debates during the 60's. Carpentier defined a concept of the baroque that wasn't so much an historical style as a cultural transhistorical aesthetic of Latin America, based on a structure of proliferation. This concept could be easily applied to the increasingly overburdened atmospheres of the uruguayan, very complex systems where an infinite number of dissimilar components proliferate. This plurality not only consists in the multiplicity of Gestalts, techniques, elements, levels and resources, but as well, in the diversity between them. A plurality of structure and language. Thus the work combines conceptual art with visual based art, considered its opposite. On the one hand it gives priority to the idea to the extreme of accentuating textuality and erudition, with a mass of references and a discursive basis; on the other, it exhibits images derived from the graphical tradition, that stem from his long experience in engraving techniques, a subject which Capelán once taught. It's not by chance that books are always a fundamental component of his installations. They evidence the duplicity that I am referring to: they act simultaneously in their visualness as objects and space markers, as reference sources of the highly sophisticated debate that substantiates his artistic discourse.

Plurality charges every aspect of Capelán's work. It defines a poetic where the mystical and the intellectual become entwined (an unbelievable mixture of idea art and religiosity), together with the rational and the emotional, the anthropological and the personal, the "primitive" and the scientific. This poetry, its atmosphere and the articulacy of its parts lend the uruguayan a singular personality that distinguishes him from other artists and Jonathan Borofski who also uses environments with pluralistic structures.

This kind of work has made Capelán one of the most important contemporary installation artists. Previously he had developed an oeuvre as engraver and draughtsman within a marked latin american tradition, a frame where popular imagery combines with expressionist brusqueness and graphic impact (we can consider José Guadalupe Posada, Carlos González José Luis Cuevas, Francisco Toledo...). But his leanings towards concept art and performance soon led him away from this territory. He began to draw on stones, plants, walls, printed material, texts and whatever surface was capable of



Carlos Capelán. *Landscape in Water Glass*. 1993. Courtesy: C. Stellweg Gallery. NYC.

bearing his images, with a kind of obsession for drawing the whole world, like that map Borges wrote about which covered the whole surface it represented. The very title of his impressive exhibition at the Lunds Kunsthall in 1993 *Mapas y Paisajes* (Landscapes and Maps), presented this double edged critique of representation and the represented, of landscape in the map and vice versa.

In this sense, as much as in relation to the paradigms of the baroque and to the pluralism of his work, I remember one of his projects that pretended to draw on every leaf of a tree. He didn't imagine it as a gesture. To conceive graphic art almost like a kind of land art corresponded to a mystical need for communication with things through a graphic sensibility much closer to the East than to the West. The thought and art of buddhism, taoism and other oriental religions provide a fundamental course for his artistic work.

The transgression of his graphic work beyond the usual formats led to it being included in the installations where we always find monumental drawings on the walls or work on paper. This gives his environments a strong visual force, combined with the use of objects, texts, and other more traditional materials common to installation practice. The extremely effective practical paradoxes in Capelán reveal a very peculiar case of "spontaneity" in the external application of conceptualism that becomes profound among the latin americans. In Latin America, idea art has been socially, politically and analytically charged, refining its linguistic and analytical capacity in order to deal with burning social issues. This uruguayan artist is a good example of this, along with Helio Oiticica, Antonio Caro, Luis Camnitzer, Cildo Meireles, Eugenio Dittborn, Alfredo Jaar, Félix González-Torres, Doris Salcedo, Jac Leirner...

Capelán has shared experience with the cuban artists José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elso and Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, and has maintained a friendship with them up to the present day,

based on aesthetic and ideological affinities. Together with them, and also with north american cuban artist Ana Mendieta, friend of the former artists, and with other insular artists like Luis Gómez, we find in the uruguayan a complete mystic and ritual sense that represents part of a strategy towards the non-western, which uses certain apertures in Western art. A dialectics that rebounds of the methodological (art as aesthetic creation and independent communication, conceptualism, inclusivism), to the cosmovisionary (a *Weltanschauung* made up of non-western spiritualities).

This itinerary, united to the character of its imagery, sometimes has led to Capelán being included within trendy debates about "primitivism" in Europe. Besides the rustic eurocentricity that can characterize these debates frequently, such a label would be pertinent if this "primitivism" were to be considered as the use of certain peripheral cultural tools whose subtlety and complexity renders them extremely efficient in the construction of discourses consonant with contemporary polyfocality and its many implications.

To discuss such artists as Bedia, Elso or Capelán in this light, would underline, however, the importance of "primitivism" in the make up of the contemporary within the processes of globalization and multiculturalism. The "primitive" as dynamic force, as transformative, and not as essence, authenticity or tradition. In the uruguayan's case, the "primitive" would end up in erudite "postmodern" discussion, especially in terms of anthropology. Recently Robert Farris Thompson declared in the press: "Postmodernism is over: the spirits return".

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