

THE AGES OF MUMÚ

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"I am only interested in what I do not understand"

Lucrecia Lioni (2005)

Childhood

I am trying to remember the scene in which, mixed among a group of incoming students, Lucrecia Lioni ("Mumú," in her native Tucumán) burst in to say that she had chosen to study at Taller C¹ because she hated contemporary art. She wanted to know what it was about. For me (for us, those of us who worked in that class²), that episode with its youthful freshness was just one more symptom denoting the need to strive to expose the elusive nature of current art even more clearly and effectively.

To offer, in effect, an explanation that would begin by challenging the structures that common sense considers immutable. As is known, we tend to value only those things that are directly linked to our capacity to perceive and understand the world, that is, as we believe they appear before us and not in relation to their many other possibilities of existence. The immanent problem evidenced in Lucrecia's defiant concern is that this prejudice initially prevented her from exploring what was beyond her immediate sensory-cognitive experience. It denied her the understanding that everything that exists does not necessarily abide by the laws of the absolute and immutable just because cultural structures acquired over the years affirmed it as such.

With that demand set forth, our challenge was (and still is) not to teach how things are made, but to generate the conditions to imagine that they might not have been as they are and that they can change in the future, consequently modifying our capacity to approach them, for, above all, they are contingent. Thus, we thought we would be better positioned to address the concerns of students like Lucrecia if we postulated art as a phenomenon that can always be different from itself, capable of subverting those old prejudices of stability cemented in concepts we consider essential when they are, in reality, imposed. By recovering its capacity to speak without resorting to aesthetic dogmas, we could open a space for the construction of new forms of research and the production of knowledge.

¹ From the then Licenciatura en Artes Plásticas (today Licenciatura en Artes Visuales) taught at the Facultad de Artes at the Universidad Nacional de Tucumán.

² I express it in the plural because in Taller C I always worked conscientiously with my colleagues Marcos Figueroa and Geli González, to whom I owe so much.

We will better understand this whole muddle if we go back to the controversial statement "God is dead," enunciated by Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century. As is known, or deduced, it was an attempt to murder a god who, nevertheless, managed to survive. Yet that attempt to de-divinize the world enabled another radical change only twenty-seven years later: in 1913, Marcel Duchamp would have a clear path to de-divinize art with his first *readymade*³. Indeed, despite the perennial vigor of Platonism, Nietzsche was able to question the notion that a demiurge placed archetypes in the world of ideas to guide human beings in the construction of their earthly value structure. Because of this, in the art world, distracted spectators imagine that by concentrating their gaze on ordinary objects, one seeks to give a new meaning to things that have none, hence their rejection of the contemporary.

However, the de-divinization of art modified the way we interpret it because, by breaking with the metaphysical tradition, the chain of elucidation of the signs of the world in general, and of art in particular, became infinite. I mean, absolute interpretations disappeared, making the things of this world distressing (Lucrecia's distress) because they have become unbearably ambiguous to us. Therefore, in terms of contemporary art, eliminating divinity implied the challenge of focusing the gaze on the contingent and real aspects of our circumstances, causing the vector toward those models—presumed to be excellent, transcendent, universal, sublime, necessary, and perennial because they were paradigmatic—to disappear. This is why at Taller C we work on the need to explain that, distanced from metaphysical explanations, the art of our time disturbs the meaning of things through operations that dismantle, reassemble, and reconnect them with other planes, seeking to make them resonate in an unusual way and thus destabilizing the idea of a single meaning.

Adolescence

When at the beginning of her creative process in 2006, Lucrecia Lioni began by appropriating the treasures of her childhood, composed of objects such as scented erasers, colored pencils, *glacé* paper, chocolate wrappers, and other trinkets, she confirmed the assertions of Rosalind Krauss. In 1999, Krauss had warned about the proliferation of the use of new, non-specific materials that blurred the defined roles of "painters" or "sculptors," replacing them with the generic notion of "artists," because those traditional identities no longer found their place in the pre-Duchampian metaphysical paradigm.

Thus, as a true child of her time, alongside the trifles that Lioni introduced as the material and support for her pieces, fluidity, flexibility, transience, play, the insignificant, the fragile, the

³ I refer to *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913.

invisible, and naturally, irony, were present from the beginning of her creative process. Early pieces such as *Collage, un ensayo finito*, *Carta en donde explico la caída de un rayo y sus consecuencias*, or *Proceso* (2008) were characterized not only by the precariousness and contingency of the materials used but by their accumulation, a certain lack of interest in the overall form, and, above all, the use of "silly manual skills"⁴ in the making of the pieces. Behind these choices of materials and resources challenged by Lucrecia, her interest deepened in the moment when a thing is and is not at the same time, thus exploring the limit between the fleeting and the resistant, the trivial and the profound, the extraordinary and the everyday. I mean, between that which we might come to call Art but which, nonetheless, can be embodied in an object that common sense considers entirely futile and inconsequential.

At this point, I am interested in analyzing the original meaning of the word "precarious," which applies to what is flimsy, permeable to the will or decision of others, and refers to something "subject to" because it conveys vulnerability, a risk of collapsing or being damaged. It also suggests an immanent tension on the border of a region in which, as I expressed, that something can be a work of art and not be one at the same time. In this regard, there is something else I wish to rescue: the artist Thomas Hirschhorn makes a crucial distinction between the ephemeral and the precarious. The ephemeral alludes to nature with its cyclic logic of birth and death, decay and rejuvenation, or the rhythmic repetition of the seasons. In contrast, precariousness possesses a dimension that is ethical and therefore also political, for it refers to decisions made by human beings whose consequences fall upon other human beings.

This aspect is interesting for beginning to analyze a third "age" or more mature stage of Lucrecia, already settled in the CABA⁵, when the resource of precariousness deepens in her work. In doing so, a more evident link appears between poetics and ethics, between poetics and politics. Effectively, upon leaving home, the rigorous self-referential aspect of the pieces from her creative adolescence weakens, and Lucrecia definitively allows herself to be affected by something of the order of the external, of the order of the public. Without centering on a discourse about the causes of poverty and marginalization, the use of precarious materials as urban waste that we observe daily in our cities (I am thinking of *Colección privada*, 2014, for example) refers to the spontaneous and anonymous constructions of the urban fabric, its street art, its unfinished ventures, or its vacant lots.

Adulthood

⁴ As expressed to her by my colleague, Marcos Figueroa, alluding in a critique to "escuelismo," a term used in the Buenos Aires scene to refer to the influence on contemporary art of the formative model of the Argentine primary school.

⁵ Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, the Capitl city of Argentina.

I would like to appropriate a concept I read in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, written in 1958. In this book, Arendt proposes three central "activities" that define our nature as a species: "labor," "work," and "action". According to her, labor occupies the lowest scale as it is produced within the deepest intimacy and is oriented exclusively toward actions linked to self-care and mere subsistence. Its product is life itself; it is characterized by the almost immediate exhaustion of what has been done, and it is the most anti-political of activities because it does not require the presence of other human beings, as the person practicing it is immersed in the laws of nature.

Conversely, through work, the human species distances itself from the elementary drives of the natural and produces objects with the aim of attempting to understand and dominate it. For its part, action is linked to the concepts of freedom and plurality, within which Arendt involves both distinction and freedom, which simultaneously entail the capacity to generate something completely new. Thus, for Arendt, the political aspect of the human resides in novelty and freedom.

One of the reasons why the precariousness of Lucrecia Lioni's work has been very well received is due to the increased awareness of the instability and uncertainty of recent decades. In fact, there are reasons to perceive a radical state of crisis not only in our country but in the US and Europe. In Argentina at least, the last ten years have been characterized by debates over growing social precariousness. Surprisingly, the analysis of capitalism performed in 1958 by Hannah Arendt still resonates in these discussions. Indeed, observing the unprecedented increase in production and consumption, Arendt had already predicted that "all economy tends to become an economy of waste, in which things must be devoured and discarded as quickly as they appear in the world".

According to this thinker, the balance between those three main activities that constitute the human condition has been interrupted because labor has substituted work, there is little room for political action and, as an aggravating factor, every moment not used for labor is also oriented toward consumption and disposal. The human being is then so caught up in what Arendt calls "the smooth functioning of a process that never ends" that they have lost all sense of responsibility toward the world and their fellow beings.

I am quoting this author at length because, in relation to those three activities (labor, work, and action), I would like to position Lucrecia's work in a positive way. Although Arendt places art within the human activity of work, I allow myself to place it within that of actions. Art, besides producing tangible and intangible objects of high symbolic value, is also a way of generating knowledge, which involves distinction and freedom. Accepting that there are works that are much more political (directly associated with authoritarian times and containing an underlying rhetoric of liberation and anarchy) Lucrecia Lioni's textiles are also political because they become actions. In other circumstances, their natural place would have been that of labor or work, thus crossing in a single leap the gap between the world of the apolitical and that of the political.

For this reason, I believe that the evolution from Lucrecia's early self-referential works, through her pieces that deepen the use of precarious materials, and finally leading to the production of her latest textiles, emphasizes the political plane of her mature work. This is not because it openly criticizes the capitalist cult, but because it generates a displacement in practices and objects toward the plural and the free, opening a space for imagination and change, and circumventing, in some way, the restlessness produced by the current loss of the sense of the political. (Now I have in mind her series *Cafeteo y mosto tinto*, 2017; *Extractivismo Senti Mental*, 2023; *Cárcel & Vals*; *Brazo con piquete*, 2024, and other pieces that bring me such joy to look at) .

This novelty in the distribution of meaning is offered to us in the context of an evolution of practice that, before belonging to the world of art, belonged to the world of invisible or simple gestures of labor and work. To become (*devenir*), then, means that the most familiar data of life have changed meaning or that we no longer maintain the same relations with the habitual elements of our elementary existence. In such a way, in a new realm of freedom, suppressed, silenced, and banished voices begin to speak, stammering with their own rules. Indeed, Lucrecia's latest textiles belong to this terrain because, from within the heart of the hegemonic art world, they make themselves heard in their minority language, fostering new discursive matrices and forms of identification.

The true political power of Lucrecia's art is found, finally, in the subtle appearance of slogans from feminism, ecologism, anti-racism, the body, memory, gender, or territory. But Lucrecia Lioni adds honey to the bitter syrup, reassuring us with her poetic reflections, her good humor, and the power of her prodigious imagination. If we wish to enter the moment of critical reflection, that now depends entirely on us.