

HEATED DEBATE

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In the Argentine art scene, we have recently witnessed a heated controversy regarding the ethical appropriateness of granting an award to the aesthetic analyst Rodrigo Cañete. Indeed, the International Center for the Arts of America at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (USA) awarded him the “Peter C. Marzio Prize 2020” for his book *Historia a contrapelo del arte argentino*¹. However, the community linked to the visual arts in our country reacted by requesting that the award be withdrawn, due to his posts characterized by misogyny, hatred toward diverse gender identities and older adults, racism, fatphobia, bullying campaigns, harassment, and psychological abuse that Cañete used to carry out through his blog and podcasts.

The debate shifted toward the questionable legitimacy of *cancel culture*, and someone rightly suggested reading the book in order, as I understand it, not to waste time engaging with its controversial author, but rather with the text itself. As a signatory of two of the statements opposing the award, I also agree that a text should be answered with another text. Thus, once I acquired the book, I began leafing through it, scanning its subtitles in my usual disorderly manner. I stopped at the section titled “*Poverty as Spectacle: the ‘Poverty Porn’ of Gabriel Chaile*”, and I immediately knew where to begin.

It did not take long to notice that those pages devoted to the Tucumán-born artist are imbued with the same prejudice that, like a glint at the back of the eyes, I almost always perceive in interlocutors from more developed and mature art scenes than my own. Indeed, artists from the provinces are often attributed a certain inability to articulate statements and/or poetics that engage with the contemporary and challenge dominant discourse autonomously. This is because there is a tendency to judge the Other from one’s own cultural horizon, whether by considering them different, thus classifying them within categories such as “typicality” or “exoticism”, or by assuming that this Other shares a similar experience, prompting an approach based on conceptual frameworks already known and presumed to be shared².

¹ Rodrigo Cañete, *Historia a contrapelo del arte argentino* (2020). Sudamericana, Buenos Aires.

² This explains the lack of awareness that Gabriel Chaile is part of a phenomenon of young artists from Tucumán who migrate to more favorable art scenes well before completing their undergraduate studies, and that at the institution where they began, there is no degree titled Bachelor of “Fine” Arts. At the time Chaile studied at the Facultad de Artes, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán (UNT), different degrees were granted according to discipline, with the Bachelor’s degree in Arts corresponding to specializations such as Painting, Sculpture, or Printmaking

Through such prejudices (so distinctly *porteño!*), Cañete defines Chaile through the stereotype of the poor provincial artist and, falling into a simplistic Manichaeism, denies him any possibility of negotiating with the art system. At the same time, he questions the legitimacy of the contemporaneity of his language and discourse, as it is, in practice, we, provincial artists, who must strive to exercise these “rights,” even more so if we are not bourgeois and our skin is not white. Paradoxically, as an aesthetic analyst operating within hegemonic scenes, what Cañete claims in his own defense (“In Argentina, a dark-skinned son of a Guaraní boxer cannot have opinions like mine”³) is precisely what he denies to Gabriel Chaile as a provincial artist.

Let us continue. According to Cañete, “Art Basel is the most visible place where the perpetrators of the neoliberal system gather to purchase works for their properties, offices, and private collections,” which would suggest a contradiction between that context and the discourse embodied in “*Aguas calientes*”⁴, the work with which Chaile participated in that fair in 2019. Its discourse refers to the collective labor efforts undertaken by many women to confront the endemic poverty that has afflicted the outskirts of Latin American cities for decades.

In fact, *Aguas calientes* operates within the hybrid artistic language that Claire Bishop defines as “participatory practices,” as the artist exchanges used cooking pots from community kitchens for new ones, later intervening on them with references to iconic representations of certain Indigenous cultures of the Argentine Northwest (NOA)⁵, and subsequently exhibiting them as transformed artworks.

For Cañete, “Chaile’s kiosk-performance is not the representation of a protest, but the staging of the spectacle of consuming protest as a commodity.” He adds: “If Prada displays handbags on shelves while offering champagne to clients, Chaile does so with pots and *mate cocido*.” I would call this reasoning upon false premises, as it mistakenly equates handbags with intervened communal cooking pots. Indeed, these are not only very different signifiers, but also carry profoundly different meanings. If we consider them as signs, Prada handbags are displayed within contexts of enunciation that align so coherently that they introduce no conflict whatsoever. They do not do so because they are presented from the outset as signifiers that require no interpretation, suffocating any discursive productivity. By contrast, Chaile’s pots, through their physical, functional, cultural, and linguistic displacement, do enable debate, as they expose an antagonism between the object itself (with its explicitly

³ Source: interview available online.

⁴ Gabriel Chaile, *Aguas calientes* (2019).

⁵ For example, Candelaria, Aguada, or Chaco-Santiagoña cultures.

visible origin), the economically and socially elitist context in which it is presented, and the viewers who consume it both materially and symbolically. I do not intend to suggest that, at the very heart of an international commercial art fair, *Aguas calientes* embodies a rhetoric of emancipation free of contradiction. However, I would argue that the parallel drawn by Cañete is excessive, if not erroneous.

Having been Gabriel Chaile's professor for three consecutive years does not make me an expert on his world, but it does help me understand that his work, political from its very origins, while skeptical of the hypothesis of changing reality (as that is the role of politics), can nevertheless contribute to a greater understanding of certain social phenomena through the manipulation of Otherness and Difference. These are only enabled insofar as there is space for the deviations mentioned earlier: physical, functional, cultural, and linguistic.

Finally, I would like to conclude by stating that Gabriel Chaile is not a commercial or dishonest artist, but rather one who, acknowledging the contradictions he faces, assumes the responsibility of speaking about the darker side of a world he knows very well. In this agonizing effort, he resists expelling utopia from his work, confronting the tension between imaginary ideals and the pragmatic management required to set it in motion so that it may be contemplated, even if such contemplation takes place in a zone of glamour far removed from the place where it was born.

References

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Gabriel CHAILE

Aguas calientes

Aluminum pots with welding and engravings, ladles and kettle exchanged with the Popular Assembly "Plaza Dorrego" (San Telmo, Buenos Aires).

Variable dimensions

2019

(Detail from the exhibition in the Statements section of the contemporary art fair Art Basel in Basel, Switzerland, where *Aguas calientes* was presented representing Galería Barro, Buenos Aires.)