

# CABECITAS NEGRAS

Carlota Beltrame

If we understand culture as a narrative, or rather as many narratives that, often in conflict, struggle for collective self-representation, we will understand the trajectory of provincial artistic scenes in relation to the hegemony exercised by that of our capital. To explain myself more clearly, I will take as a pretext works by two Tucumán artists of recent generations, although it should be noted that I will not speak of their “artistic quality” but rather of the discursive strategy of these pieces as emerging from a struggle to impose both their own view of what their authors feel they are, and what they would like to be.

The installation “*Muchachito de pueblo*” by Sandro Pereira<sup>21</sup> consisted of the exhibition of small vessels containing soil taken from the bottom of his house in a peripheral neighborhood of San Miguel de Tucumán. On each of them he placed different sculptural figurines, true self-portraits in the sense of a subjective perception of himself in the eyes of others. Completing the work, a series of photographs in which he portrayed himself from the beginning of his journey to the exhibition space awaiting him in Buenos Aires.

The work of Chaile<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, is a performance called “*Daniel (en la feria)*”, whose script consisted of walking through the international art fair arteBA<sup>3</sup> carrying a staff, dressed in black, and always followed by a little black lamb.

In both cases it is possible to observe a discursive form of double meaning, whose rhetorical strategy consists in working with the resources provided by the central art scene while simultaneously questioning them: the “little provincial boy,” fearful and dizzy in the big city, who literally clings to his homeland; and the one who, also literally, identifies with the stigmatized

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<sup>1</sup> Sandro Pereira studied for a Bachelor’s degree in Visual Arts at the Faculty of Arts of the National University of Tucumán (UNT), where he attended Taller C. In 2000, he founded and joined the collective *El Ingenio*, which achieved international recognition. Among other distinctions, he received the “Beca Kuitca” (2003) and the “Beca para artistas y escritores del interior del país” awarded by the Fondo Nacional de Artes (2001). He also participated in the “Encuentro de análisis y confrontación de obras para jóvenes” (2002), organized by Trama. Programa de cooperación y confrontación entre artistas (2002), as well as the “Encuentro de análisis de obras para jóvenes del NOA,” sponsored by the Antorchas Foundation and organized by Taller C of the la Facultad de Artes at UNT (1998). His works have been exhibited at MALBA, at the Mercosur Biennial (Brazil), and at “Arte Afuera” (Córdoba), and can be found in various private collections. He has been invited by curators such as Jorge Gumier Maier, Eva Grinstein, Rodrigo Alonso, and Gerardo Mosquera.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Chaile studied for a Bachelor’s degree in Facultad de Artes, Universidad nacional de Tucumán, where he attended Taller C. In 2009, he was awarded a scholarship by the YPF Foundation to take part in the Artists Program at the Torcuato Di Tella University. In 2010, he received the First Itaú Cultural Prize for Visual Arts. His works are included in various private collections, and he has been invited by curators such as Jorge Figueroa, Patricia Hakin, and Mercedes Viegas.

<sup>3</sup> arteBA is the most important contemporary art fair in Latin America. It is held every year in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (Argentina), over three consecutive days in the month of May.

black sheep in all cultures.

### **Three Versions of the Other**

In my opinion, “otherness” implies the awareness of something that the Self does not possess and consequently entails the necessary loss or questioning of inherited identity preconceptions that we tend to regard as unquestionable and immutable. However, there is not a single idea of the Other, but at least two that we encounter daily; and there is also a third, perhaps more sophisticated.

Let us see: on the one hand, the “*absolute Other*” embodies the fascination we feel for successful figures, generally due to some of the obscene distortions of the capitalist world; glamorous people who dazzle us with their stardust and whom we may envy but do not fear, because the distance they impose is such that it protects us from any intimidation. At the opposite pole, there is the “*Other who hurts*,” onto whom we project fantasies of culturally opposed subjects according to timeless and clearly identifiable parameters that they embody to our detriment. Something exposes their otherness with such violence that it makes us feel deeply threatened, due to a Manichean mental scheme in which the Other is annulled by intolerance and misunderstanding of the Self. Finally, and less frequently in my view, we encounter an otherness whose difference immediately emerges, although sympathy arises from conceptual frameworks, no less prejudiced, that we believe we know and share with it.

### **Universal vs. Particular**

An artist from the “center” would never doubt the universality of their own art, since, according to an already established order of things, universality would automatically be present in their work. It is the others who must strive to achieve it, as if it were a goal to be reached, something that, for an artist located outside the dominant centers of production, distribution, and consumption, always seems far from their place of origin. For them (for us), their obligatory destiny would include a future hegemonic identity, so that their local artistic scene can only be seen as a mere stage of apprenticeship.

However, this drive toward the “universal” is opposed by the unspoken sediments of History, which include innumerable stories and a surprising variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures, frequently erased or ignored by what we mistakenly call the “contemporary” and/or the “universal.” Indeed, it is often said that contemporary art blurs local features, suggesting that the contemporary would be a style born from the legitimate desire to be in tune with the universal, since, after all, wherever we are, no one can deny us the right to feel like citizens of the world. Aligning oneself with the achievements of more “developed” communities would be a deceptive impulse, since it tends to flatten particular traits produced by

the sustained familiarity of local stimuli that give us identity. Thus, the particular is what defines us through traditions we invent to feel less alone, accounting for our most specific traits. The conflict arises when we take the contemporary as an extreme universalism that denies collective subjectivity, or conversely when we fall into intense particularisms that exhaust interpretive possibilities in the strictly local.

### **Minority Languages**

The practice of a minority language is not only about complicity but also about modesty. That is, about keeping something unsaid, preserving it, and sharing it in silence only with peers. A minority language is practiced like a password, whose decoding is entrusted to the spectator-accomplice, who understands that the thoughts to which the work refers can be inferred from its narrative, but are not contained in it; that is, things, experiences, perceptions, reactions appear that have not been explicitly placed in the artistic text. The exercise of a minority language is a local (that difficult word) way of managing meaning that reduces its density in the eyes of outsiders, who cannot fully grasp the difference from which artists in non-hegemonic scenes present themselves. Thus, no matter how contemporary most of a work's features may be, when expressed in a minority language it presupposes an ideal reader who, sharing the communicational scene with its author, decodes all the folds of its modest local discourse. It is a discursive form in which rhetorical strategy consists in working with existing resources while simultaneously questioning them, turning the spectator into a confidant, an accomplice who, more than understanding the codes of contemporary art, shares counter-hegemonic signs. This opens meaning to all the forces that produce, affect, determine, and intensify it. Thus, its inherent semantic and structural doubleness makes it suitable for the paradoxes of the contemporary world, on the one hand, and of double identity on the other, since globalization unfolds simultaneously at universal and particular levels.

However, the apparently desirable fraternity of hegemonic artists tends to include, as bastard children, those who do not belong to their scenes. Political courtesy promotes the inclusion of poetics of difference in national and international curatorial practices, while artists from non-hegemonic centers paradoxically return to the use of minority languages. What matters is not whether those poetics contain more or fewer local traits; rather, in my view, what makes them contemporary is the translatability of most of their signs across space and time.

### **“Play with Strange-Coloured Children”**

Let us return to Sandro Pereira and Gabriel Chaile. Both entered the hegemonic scene of

the capital city with their right foot forward, since as Duplus<sup>4</sup> artist and YPF Foundation<sup>5</sup> fellow respectively, they had ideal conditions to develop interesting careers, sustaining a discourse of self-representation through which they sought to account for their origins. As explained, such discursive strategy correlates with the fascination for culturally opposed forms often promoted by artistic talent. This position has become a reference for a significant part of contemporary criticism, addressing an audience willing to accept the principle of otherness or the existence of a non-hegemonic world, always distant and diffuse, yet deeply attractive.

What does it feel like to come from a small Argentine province once considered “unviable”<sup>6</sup>? How does one confront being valued as the Other? For the Buenos Aires scene, Chaile and Pereira were (are) peculiar creatures or a somewhat hopeless variant of the artist, because in any case they are defined by their externality, subjected to the subtle violence of being condemned to exoticism and typification in all its forms (picturesqueness, tenderness, compassion, humor, etc.).

Between “*Muchachito de pueblo*” (2001) and “*Daniel (en la feria)*” (2010) there are almost ten years, yet the operation and strategy remained the same: two young artists arriving in the capital with a discourse voluntarily assumed from otherness, since, in contrast to the supposedly homogeneous contemporary art field, they assert the existence of an Other who speaks from “outside.” Thus, their work does not provoke fear or rejection because the center-periphery opposition is denied, but precisely because it remains in place and is perceived as picturesque and tolerated, insofar as this Other, by self-naming itself, is already somewhat closer to the center than to its place of origin. Moreover, their operation involves a strategy of relocating themselves at the heart of the hegemonic scene, colonizing its universal claims with their particular minor histories. This self-built visibility allows them to activate other gazes, drawing the hegemonic scene’s attention to the gestures of their minority language, though secretly and paradoxically, these are only shared by those who speak it: other artists, critics, and spectators from the same community.

### **Conclusion, or the Unresolved Trap**

My concern with this problem arises from a critical review of Chaile’s and Pereira’s works

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<sup>4</sup> Exhibited in 2001 at Duplus, an independent contemporary art exhibition space for contemporary art, managed by the artists Santiago García Aramburu, Lucio Dorr, Pablo Zicarello, and Hernán Salamanco. In 2002, this space participated in arteBA with “*Homenaje al ságuiche de milanese*” by Pereira, which was sold immediately, becoming the emblem of the fair.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Chaile obtained that scholarship in 2009, which allowed him to participate in the aforementioned Artists Program at Torcuato Di Tella University.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth recalling that under the presidency of Carlos Saúl Menem, the Minister of Economy Domingo Cavallo (1989–1996) promoted political isolation and declared the NOA (Northwest Argentina) and other regions of the country distant from the center as “unviable,” a position he continued to uphold during his brief and disastrous tenure in 2001, under the government of Dr. Fernando de la Rúa.

within a research framework that examines the gaze from the center toward provincial art scenes, which, when self-representing through a contemporary register, escape the rigid compartments that once strictly separated the local from the global, the particular from the universal. I believe this concern is not insignificant within a history of exclusion inherited from the uneven and combined development of our country, in which economic exchanges and progress have always benefited the port area while condemning the rest of the provinces.

The force with which a significant part of criticism accepts the principle of otherness is as deceptive as our own anxiety to be recognized, since, in my view, its hegemonic conception still posits the existence of an immutable identity frozen in time. Thus dialogue is not always genuine, as it seeks to classify non-central artists within schemes of typicality or exoticism, defining them through a simplistic and unchanging stereotype that ultimately flattens cultural negotiation to the surface level. Thus, supported by institutions, the best-known branch of multiculturalism dangerously incorporates and celebrates difference and alterity without modifying underlying power relations or hegemonic narratives, thereby fetishizing marginality and producing, in effect, a devaluation of alterity.

A way to escape this trap, in my view, is the discursive strategy of “*Muchachito de pueblo*” and “Daniel (en la feria)”, which did not consist so much in the agonistic effort to move from the “closed zone” of the province to the “open zone” of the capital, but rather in how one positions oneself within asymmetries. It was not about establishing contact, but about the way in which contact occurs; not about cultural clash, but about the types of relations that produce it. By working within a contemporary register (they are contemporary), these artists share a language with dominant culture while also recovering what had been denied them due to their condition of origin in socially depressed and vulnerable contexts. In my view, the works of Chaile and Pereira propose a form of resistance because they open spaces closed by dominant ideology, displaying not similarities but differences as fragments of what had been denied to them as inhabitants of the periphery of a periphery.

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