

Your work has often explored the museum as a problematic cultural site and validating system. Recently the narratives of Echo and Narcissus have entered this discussion about exhibition spaces. Could you describe the appeal of these figures and how they relate to the project you have developed for El Museo Experimental El Eco?

Last summer I made a visit to the Chapada Diamantina, a region in Brazil covered with mountains, caves and other mineral formations. While visiting some of the caves it happened very often that the guide would point out a particular formation and ask to the visitants, what is it? Visitors needed to stare to the abstract walls and guess. The figures ranged from a dolphin, a face, a mermaid, an electric guitar, and a piece of bacon.

I found interesting a space where figures are apparently hidden; almost blend with the environment, a space where there is no difference between figure and background. I started to think how different museums and galleries are from the cave experience, where the spaces are neat and white, where the works are immediately recognizable.

In terms of mythology, I thought of Narcissus as a white cube exhibition space, and Echo as a cave. The practice of finding images in stains on the walls and rock formations is closer to the imaginative nature of Echo, who tries to repeat what Narcissus says, but her voice gets inevitably distorted, becoming something else all the time.

On the opposite way, Narcissus is a repetition device, trying constantly to confirm his image, through his reflection on the water. The consequences of this gesture imply a complete denial of the outside world, in order to confirm the uniqueness of the self.

I am on echo's side. This exhibition will include friends and relatives of Echo, characters who are in a constant dialogue with their surroundings, establishing conversations that transform their shape constantly.

Fables have recently been of increasing interest for you, particularly those involving non-humans: animals, plants, rocks or objects. Please articulate how you engage with these specific narratives, their various sources and how they relate to the concept of "uncomfortable objects" that you have been developing?

Lately, I have been collecting dialogues and fables among non-humans, such as Aesop's fables, Ovid's metamorphoses, Lewis Carroll's dialogues, and fables by Augusto Monterroso, Horacio Quiroga, Antonin Artaud, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Mario de Andrade, Franz Kafka, and Montaigne.

At the beginning I found these dialogues only in fiction literature, but afterwards I started to find experiments of that sort among historians of science, philosophers, and anthropologists. I believe that this attempt comes from a necessity to build up a genealogy of things, to observe them as entities which have been transformed, discarded, mutated, placed in diverse and contradictory contexts throughout history.

What non-humans have to say about the world we constructed around them, about our definitions, manipulations and usages? What is left of the objects after so much historical maneuvering and what would be the testimony of these objects if they could tell us their story from their perspective?

Our contemporary society is crowded with *uncomfortable objects*, products of desire, research or imagination; they trigger our conception of the world and compel us to take a position, to change completely our basic understanding of the universe.

Uncomfortable objects are constantly being erased, replaced, neutralized and destroyed in order to give space to new things, but this erasure is never complete, we are surrounded more and more by things, quasi-things, fragments, distortions and hybrids. At the same time there is a

contrast between infinite possibilities and limited resources. The human desire and power of transformation is strong and blind, resulting in the extinction of species and the erosion of essential natural resources.

Anthropology continually plays a strong role in your research and projects. Can you describe your attraction to this field and how you see it in dialogue with your artistic practice and with contemporary art in general?

Lately I found in anthropology many resonances with contemporary art praxis. The same as within the art world, anthropology is trapped in a system of self reflection. Probably in anthropology it is more clear, as the necessity of doing a field research an engaging with other communities is crucial for the practice. It is based on the necessity to understand the other but the final thesis are not accessible to the original source, they are just a mechanism of projection for the apparatus of anthropology.

The case of the art world is a bit more complex, as the final product has an ambiguous audience projection. At the same time, as an artist you need to be self-reflexive, site specific, and critical.

The artist is in a trap from which it is difficult to escape, and this self awareness almost avoids the possibility of creating metaphors, or of actually addressing something else apart from the system.

Roy Wagner makes this point clear in a conversation with Coyote:

Roy: “Isn’t that what linguists do, in a purely hypothetical sense? And isn’t it what Heisenberg did when he called our inability to determine both the location and the velocity of a particle at the same time an *uncertainty principle*, as though the particle itself were uncertain as to its own motion and location?”

Coyote: “And isn’t that what you are doing to me right now by *anthropomorphizing* me, pretending that I am an anthropologist just like you? Heisenberg pointed out that we interfere with tiny particles in the very act of observing them, and so re-project our own intentions inadvertently upon the particle (or Coyote, as the case may be). But what he did not allow himself to concede was that the particle was doing the same thing back to him, for ‘it’ had entered his own thought process as though it were part of his own neural net.”

Roy: “Which, by that time, it was. Or, in other words, by virtue of the fundamental subject/object shift, *I got coyotes on the brain.*”¹

The cave you have made for this project is a loose structure of open and closed spaces, made from a rectilinear metal frame, over which you have placed a faux-rock covering, made of paper-maché. Within the paper-maché appear numerous

¹ ROY WAGNER, *COYOTE ANTHROPOLOGY*, 2010

images. Could you describe your use of paper-maché in this work, as well as reveal some of the sources of the images you have imbedded within this material? If you could also touch on the development of the geometric frame, its form and the relation it sets up with the faux-rock covering.

In his essay "The marble and the myrtle: on the inconstancy of the savage soul", anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro starts with a quote by the portuguese missionary Antonio Vieira:

“Those who wandered through the world can see in those gardens two kinds of very different statues, ones made out of marble, others of myrtle. The marble statues are very difficult to make, because of the hardness and resistance of matter; but once finished, it is not necessary to work on it any more: always preserves the same figure; the myrtle statue is easier to form, because of the docility of the branches and the leaves, but it is necessary to work on it constantly. If the gardener stops working, in four days there is a branch going through the eyes, another one that deforms the ears, instead of five fingers seven appear, what it was before a human shape, becomes a confusion of green and myrtles. ”

Through this image, Vieira compares European and "savage" civilizations. For him, European culture is similar to marble, difficult to mold, but once the shape is done, it is a guaranty that it will last over the centuries. On the contrary, the "savage" civilizations, like the Brazilian in this case, are more malleable, at first sight it seems that they accept the doctrine, and adapt themselves to the imposed habits, nevertheless it is just necessary to be distracted for a second and they return to their old rituals.

The piece I developed for El Eco follows the behavior of a myrtle sculpture, which climbs over a geometric shape. The pattern is similar to an **epiphyte** plant, such as bromelias or orchids that grows upon another plant or sometimes upon some other object, without a parasite behavior. They are also called *air plants*.

I use papier-mâché, a technique that I have been interested for a long time, because of its flexibility and simplicity and also the link it has with Mexican crafts.

The images that cover the structure are based on my experience in Brazil during the last two years. They include people, places and travels where I followed “the inconstancy of the savage soul”, discovering its generosity, flexibility and playfulness.

The Museum of the images of the unconscious, where I discovered their amazing archive and the paintings of Artur Amora, the National Museum, where I learned about Amerindian perspectivism, the house of Lina Bo Bardi in Sao Paulo, her exhibitions of popular art, the botanical garden in Rio de Janerio, the wastelands of paper-maché sculptures after the carnival, Glauber Rocha, mathematical models of non-linear figures, and many more.

The optical play that occurs with the images included in the piece creates confusion between the figures represented in the images and the background on which they are positioned. You have mentioned elsewhere your reading on the concept of “figure-ground reversal.” Can you explain this idea, its origins and relation to your artistic project?

I have been interested since a while in potential images, images which need to be constructed by the viewer, images which are invented or build up by a collective hallucination such as miraculous images that appear by filtrations of water, strange reflections, and so on. Potential images trigger our perception priorities as the background and the figure and not perfectly defined.

I am interested on this not just as a formal puzzle, but also as a question on intentionality, and how we decide where attention is focused. I search images, texts and experiences where these boundaries blur.

Anthropologist Roy Wagner talks about figure-ground reversal in similar terms in his conversation with Coyote. According to Coyote, “perception is a very tricky thing”.

Roy: “So why is perception a fake?”

Coyote: “See, Roy, we do not see the world we see, hear the sounds we hear, touch the things we touch, or in any way perceive what we perceive, but that something else comes in-between.”

Coyote: “Sure. As they say: ‘Figures don’t lie, but liars can Figure.’”

Roy: “The sounds and shapes that you have been trained to react to and project (so that by now it has become quite unconscious) form the pattern or content of first-attention reality. The spaces between and around those words, or between the words and the things they stand for, which you notice only in passing, form the backdrop of second-attention reality.”

Your title for the El Eco project, “This constructed disorder, allows geological surprises for the most abandoned memory,” is taken from a poem by Carlos Pellicer. You have also reproduced this poem, the form of one of the posters for the public to take away with them. What is your interest in the poetry of Pellicer and this poem in particular?

The title for the show comes from Carlos Pellicer’s poem “Esquemas para una oda tropical a cuatro voces, Segunda Intención”.

I am interested in the work of Carlos Pellicer, as a poet but also as an intellectual who was engaged in music, visual arts, archaeology and anthropology. The poem is an ode to the Mexican jungle, in Tabasco. I consider the poem as a piece with multiple perspectives and voices, it is not the poet describing nature, but becoming bird, plant, sunset, serpent, guanábana, sunshine, water, tongue, green, multitude.

“Ontologies concerned with transformation (and by extension, the recycling or limited nature of life) are also marked by “perspectivism” or the idea that the world is inhabited by different kinds of persons who “apprehend reality from distinct points of view”. Non-humans see things as ‘people’ do. But the things that they see are different: what to us is blood, is maize or beer to the jaguar; what to the souls of the dead is a rotting corpse, to

us is soaking mandioc; what we see as muddy waterhole, the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house. Amerindian perspectivism, the end point of an exchange process arrives when one of the two parties incorporates (devours) the other. Here, what we have are perspectives that eat each other".²

² EDUARDO VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, INTERVIEW