

On density and movement in Miguel Palma's work

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Six Memos for the Next Millennium – American lessons by Italo Calvino at the invitation of Harvard University gather the writer's notes on a six lecture cycle dedicated to some literary values he considered ought to be preserved in the next millennium: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity.

Like Italo Calvino's reflections in his *American lessons*, one of the ways of approaching the present exhibition by Miguel Palma at Solar Gallery is to develop an analysis on the value of density and to draw from it a potentially expansive perspective to Palma's work. In his first conference, devoted to the dichotomy lightness-heaviness, Calvino develops a commentary on the history of literature, stressing two different and opposed models of practice, likely to extrapolate to the field of sculpture production and visual language:

*We might say that throughout the centuries two opposite tendencies have competed in literature: one tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses; the other tries to live language the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations.*¹

If we observe Miguel Palma's work having in mind the two tendencies here described, it could be said that it matches a practical experience close to the second line expressed by Italo Calvino and that it shares with it some of its most particular presuppositions. More than extracting or subtracting weight to the objects, Miguel Palma's artistic practice is composed of material means, materialization exercises and sculptural appropriation that uncover the material condition, the physic, solid, three-dimensional presence of bodies. This is how it conveys the fascination for all that the physical quality of the world bears, by contrast to an incorporeal rise over the world's gravity.

Despite of this visible convergence, the proximity relationship that we aim at underlining is more complex and presents some diverging aspects. If, generally speaking, the materiality and the weight of the world are shown in Miguel Palma's work, it also relies on other specificities and differences. It doesn't show the petrification or derives from the inertia Italo Calvino attributes and recognizes as weight associate qualities; it is always dynamic, at times performative.

Going back to Calvino's observation, if we accept the analogy between literary practice and sculpture's tradition, in other words, the generic values of the pure and traditional sculpture definition, in relation to weight and other physical properties of the object, we'll be able to see that Miguel Palma's sculpture is not based upon this discipline's characteristic discourse. Outside the rigidity of conventions, his works do

¹ Italo Calvino (1994). *Six Memos for the Next Millennium – American lessons*.

not refer to the questions of classical sculpture, whose objects tend to be heavy and static. On the contrary, Palma's pieces admit the flexibility of experience that is the trait of the utilitarian object, which together with its hybrid, industrial dimension, can be appropriated as readymade and reinvented or taken up again in creative acts that reflect a practice associated with the questioning of the classical sculpture's traditional monumentality.

Miguel Palma's sculptural production is also characterized by its emancipation from the discourse and definition of modern sculpture, associated to the monolithic, closed, self-contained and autonomous quality of structures. His reticence to abstraction and formalism lead him to an incompatibility with the cartesian project, and to the expression of a sensibility evident in a body of work that tends to the assertion of mobility, of flexibility and of the bodies organic density.

Even if we restrict ourselves to the works presented in this exhibition alone, we'll notice that Miguel Palma doesn't exclude the body, the physical reality of the object, the machine's structure he builds and reinvents, and that, on the contrary, he fully admits them. Nevertheless, more than the value of weight, it is density, energy and potency that are manifest in this work. By using movement inscription, one of the fundamental qualities of the manipulation and mechanical execution of his pieces, Miguel Palma leaves behind the static object and explores the original tension, granting or simulating in his artistic projects the vitality, the intensity and the thickness of the organic order in which we exist. This seems to be a weapon or a defense system against the world's inertia. Many of the mechanical devices in the author's pieces literally give life and movement to the objects, converting the inanimate in a variety of vital forms whose illusion is that of an art that appears to be alive.

From the beginning of his artistic production, there are many examples of pieces in which the author incorporates certain mechanical processes that provide movement to the experience of the object. They may contain revolution systems, reproducers of the rhythm of existence, ventilation processes that simulate nature forces, where mobility and temporality are essential conditions of the work, of its materialization and interpretation. To name only the latest examples, let us consider the case of *Cytoplasm* and of *Dead End*, two of the works on display that show the presence of bodies in constant instability and turbulence, and that even so resist all the illusory effects of the disturbing physical and atmospheric destructive phenomena.

In his body of work, Miguel Palma evokes the human through the underlined presence of animated objects and living beings. The technical devices stand for the objects and the artist's constructions as the *anima* stands for the living being, granting life to the body. It is not rare that the structures presented by the artist will, in a literal sense, express a living condition supported by movements involving the vital experience of breathing. In an inorganic, repetitive, homogeneous and circular logic, his mechanisms operate in inspiration and expiration rhythms. An excellent example of this procedure is *Vacuum*, a piece displayed in this show that, like previous works such as *Pleura* (2009), exhibits continuous movements of mechanical

oscillation in a dialectic process of expansion and contraction, of excitement and depression of bodies.

It is therefore in a perspective of sculpture as a field for the possibility of an object to transcend and expand its own territory, that his work places it self amongst the core of the contemporary sculpture's paradigm currents. And we can say that Miguel Palma's moving-sculpture conjunction gives place to the concept of a cinematic sculpture (from the greek κίνημα, movement) that certainly defines a new line of approach to his work. A line or a new, unexplored territory in the reading of that work, and that can be proposed not only regarding the pieces present in this exhibition, but also concerning previous works by the artist.

Some of those pieces, even though being sculptures, can also be understood in their particular relationship with cinematic qualities and features. Miguel Palma builds objects that project moving bodies and images and that very directly summon us to the sight experience. This idea can be confirmed in *Drive-in*, showing now at Solar, whose projection device is an emblematic example of the articulation between sculpture and image. *Magic Eye* (1993), a work that consists of an optical machine, has been the pioneer piece in this line of work by the artist. Some of his other pieces, objects and machines are located within the same genealogy and include video capturing means and image projection systems that leave equipment and machinery –cameras, projectors, monitors, and screens – visible in an installation practice: *Aeroplane* (1997), *Lisbon-Rotterdam* (2001), *Follow Me I*, *Follow Me II* (2006), *Eclipse* (2011).

Sculptor of cinematic objects, Miguel Palma materializes throughout his work a desire proclaimed by Boris Groys when, in *On the New*, a text from 2002, he answers his own question «Why does art want to be alive rather than dead?» in reference to contemporary artist's intention of overcoming the historic, abstract and dead constructions of the past. Miguel Palma belongs to this generation of artists. He produces a moving reality and at the same time challenges us in an image sequence that generates the sensation of a constant and lively updating. In a circle of endless and repetitive rhythms, similar to the loop effect of videographic experiences and of a certain experimental cinema, the outcome and the beginning are simultaneously represented. We cannot forget either that his works begin with a mental image. Before being made, the sculpture is idea, visual imagination, and only afterwards can it be materialized, crystallized into a definite form. Projected in two or three dimensions, Miguel Palma's images are, as he frequently reminds us, the result of an intuitive investment and of an experience of temporal - spatial interaction with the dense and complex reality.

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