

**Erosion and Dissolution of the Object in the  
Peruvian Art of the 1960s.****A first barely perceptible tracking coordinate\*****Miguel López/Emilio Tarazona**

Translated by: Graham Thompson

The history of Peruvian contemporary art has still not recovered from a kind of split that only recently seems to have manifested itself between the avant-garde scene that originated in the mid 1960s and that other scene that emerges, to a great extent dissociated from the first, around the late seventies. Though in the last ten years several exhibitions and local publications have offered readings and revisions of the last few decades of the visual arts in this country, these have mainly concerned themselves, in terms of that first moment of avant-garde, with the local propagation of Pop or Op art, Minimalism or Hard-edge.

Nevertheless, other aspects, inscribed in parallel with this same moment, suggest a far more complex artistic experimentalism in that convulsed era – a presence that has not only been insufficiently described but has also run the risk of being erased from the memory of its own protagonists, in many cases already removed from the core space of the visual arts. The events that this text seeks to bring to light point to the need for a re-writing of that segment of history, and cast a different light on the imaginary and the precedents, apparently lost in the mists of time, of strategies now fully incorporated into the most recent contemporary art.

These are proposals that span almost ten years, deployed from a first moment of precipitation and emergence on the local avant-garde scene through to an apparent conclusion or weakening within the panorama of that same scene. Of that broad spectrum, this essay deals only with the specific events of its irruption, focused in an exceptionally short period of time, during the first days of November of 1965, a brief instant of detonation and expansion that signalled radical transformations to come in the young art of the next few years, and emerges in this preliminary chronicle and reflection as an absent or veiled moment that has not yet been adequately inscribed as a referent or coordinate, or indeed as a milestone.

In fact, no more than three or four studies have addressed the more dematerialized aspects of experimental art practice in this country as of that moment, and none of these has enjoyed sufficient dissemination to achieve its purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the studies that have touched on the subject in some way during this period, though they have not set out to obliterate that particular experience in relation to *non-objectualism* in local art (happenings, Environments, assemblages and ephemeral objects and conceptual art, among others), have betrayed a lack of interest in or a scant regard for the local evolution of these proposals. Thus, coinciding with the moment in which these avant-garde trends were already showing signs of dissipation, Mirko Lauer evaluated them—in passing previously circumscribing them in the triad of Pop/Op/Constructivism—as bubbling forth in much the same way as the then-frequent humming of Beatles songs. In other words, they emerged with a '(...) fairly unthinking character, as a spontaneous and acritical product of the international circumstances of that time' (Lauer, 1976: 167). His text can, for a number of other decisive reasons—in consolidating its status as the most informed, persuasive and influential analysis of Peruvian art produced until then—be seen as constituting an early and far from

optimistic evaluation that provides very little stimulus for future explorations of the subject.

Similar in some ways to what Ana Longoni has designated 'cancelled bridges' in relation to the Chilean experimental art of the same period, a look at the specific interval that links the two scenes (that of the 60s and that of the late 70s) suggests, here, too, the idea of a 'history blocked, lost or severed, not narrated'. (Longoni, 2001: 223). But unlike the abrupt cut-off that took place in Chile after the extremely violent coup of 1973, the context in which this experience was dissipated in Peru in the years of Velasco Alvarado's military regime, from 1968 on, took the form of a gradual suspension: like a flame that goes out without having been subject to the action of any direct or deliberate cancellation. This suspension nevertheless made itself visible in the successive closure of a number of exhibition spaces; in the diaspora, withdrawal or interruption of the work of many artists associated with the avant-garde; and also in the departure of Juan Acha, perhaps the only critic to have given his considered support to the experimentation of those years in this country, who departed from the local scene in 1971. <sup>2</sup>

### **Prelude and First Environment**

Following the presentation of the first proposals linked to Pop and Op art in Lima toward the end of 1964, the capital received a visit from the Argentine critic Jorge Romero Brest in August 1965, in response to an invitation simultaneously extended by various institutions. Romero Brest gave no fewer than six lectures in an exhausting week of rapid presentations, influencing a number of the younger creative artists, who received for the first time images and information about the 'very newest forms of contemporary visual art', and also about the Argentine avant-garde of

those years (Romero Brest, [1965]). This event effectively coincided with the task of renovation undertaken by critics such as Juan Acha –whose point of view experienced a significant transformation in its conception of art in the wake of his visits to the Venice Biennale and Documenta in Kassel in 1964– and at the same time precipitated and inspired creative processes that evolved individually during those years. The surprising proximity of these is noted by Acha himself as a decisive moment of opening up to experimentation and to genres that did not as yet exist in the local context. As Acha anticipates:

The reality that these three exhibitions will evidence is clear: the painters of the latest generations refuse to paint; the picture is not enough for them and they abandon it. They prefer to conclude in their way, and in space, what they once painted on canvas. And if they do not construct, they select objects of everyday use, isolate them, assemble them or accumulate them (Acha, 1965a).<sup>3</sup>

The proximity in time of these exhibitions can also be read as the emergence of an avant-garde that had been inside a chrysalis and was no longer willing to accept postponements. The host of new concepts, attitudes and forms being adopted by artistic activity in an eruptive chain unleashed a sustained process of experimentation within a visual art scene that received it with gestures of at times amused indifference that nevertheless did not eclipse other public opinions and actions of open rejection and alarmed controversy.

*Mimuy* can be regarded as the first of these irruptions. Under the auspices of the Architecture Faculty of the Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería (UNI) and their own students' centres, Mario Acha, Miguel Malatesta and Efraín Montero (then final year students at the university) created an Environment that marked the emergence of an expanded notion of the field of architecture as such. The accent on

the construction of a space, together with the 'design' of the strange nonsense word used to designate it, point in that direction. The work was presented in an official venue, the Instituto de Arte Contemporáneo (IAC) –albeit in a room in the basement– but the platform provided by that institutional support was not necessarily inclined unreservedly in their favour. It is also significant here that the artists declined to include a critical presentation or text referring either to themselves or to the work in the handout, and decides to use the publication as a vehicle to convey an opinion, voicing a joint creed or manifesto whose themes and concerns nevertheless go beyond the realm of art practice to outline their own ideology of action.

The vitalism championed in this show constituted a voyage into the surreal and, in opposition to any programmatic objective, posited a place where there was room for humour and not yet for the governing idea, exalting a subjective interior space that sought to a more central role than that of verbal language: '[...] We believe that in addition to concepts there are sensations, which do not give rise to doubts. [...] We believe that there is a moment in which one must stop speaking. [...] Probably we are not saying or feeling anything new, but that too is unimportant: the essential is not outside of us.' More concretely, the text avowed 'the realization of the attitude' – an attitude that disparaged an art to be contemplated:

[...] We believe that the attitude of the artist must be directed toward the exaltation of existence, both his own and that of the others who are now becoming partners in a far wider sense that encompasses the entire being, and not only two slow eyes; beyond that there is only suicide. (Acha, Malatesta and Montero, 1965).

The photographs published in the press are not precise enough to give a clear idea of the work as a whole [Fig. 1].

These are complemented by the impression offered by other print media, which for the most part include ironic or critical appraisals. Of these, the one by Juan Acha is particularly thorough:

Armatures of wire partially lined with plaster-coated fabric resemble parts of a giant that has been carved up and scattered around the narrow basement. Arms, hands [Fig. 2], and trunk are easily recognized, but not the head, which suffers convulsions from time to time, or the derrière. In and on top of each of the parts them the most assorted useless objects have been distributed. And, finally, distributed strategically, two components of small objects, a doll, a coffin and a cabinet [Fig. 3] (Acha, 1965b).

Other press notices also describe reddish lights that partially illuminated the space, predominantly in shadow; a laid table, over which mannequin's hands were suspended as if conducting a relaxed conversation separate from their bodies [Fig. 4], cast aside in the confection of the objects, and even a rung of a ladder that active a kind of machine installed in the head of the 'giant'. A particularly acid reviewer notes:

A mannequin of rods and wires proclaiming its virility with an old horn, seemed to be the representation of the man of the era; beyond it a strange Universe in miniature, full of toys and gewgaws that shuddered every five minutes, jolted by an electrical current, mesmerized those present. All of a sudden a girl next to me in a black leotard and a rope round her neck said: 'I would like to fry some eggs on the side of a rocket'; 'It would be more interesting to reach down a star and put it in the kitchen scullery,' added another; 'Roses stink when they have tertian,' commented a boy wearing blue jeans and a checked tie. (Author unknown, 1965)

Giving credit to this last witness, the isolated description suggests an action carried out with phrases spoken by participants in the room, which assimilate the invoked space flights and celestial orbits to the earthly –and domestic– plane of everyday life. Despite the blue jeans –at the time, in the prejudices of some older people, an unequivocal sign of rebellion– seem to the commentator to repudiate the seriousness with which the event should be taken, thus casting doubt on its cultural relevance. This is inadvertently insinuated in the levity of his next observation: 'Eventually I found myself next to normal people such as Susy de Cappasso and Rosita Garibaldi. "I'm crazy," I said to them, or "What's happening here?" "You're in the *Mimuy*, that's all." And we continued on our way, among absurd objects and red walls [...].' (Author unknown, 1965).

Despite its superficiality, the article intimately elucidates the scandalous and futile banality of the stance from which one sector of the public perceived the general nature of the itinerary traced by the exhibition, in addition to offering a point of view that, from that same perspective, reflects the supposed attitude with the representatives of the official scene perceived the experience: an involuntary ennobling of the critic's surname ('Juan de Acha') or the surprise of the painter Ricardo Grau –by that time already committed to abstraction– strike the chronicler as being at odds with that intervened environment to which he refers as a painterly space.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the work aroused greater indignation in other figures from the local art scene, such as the sculptress Marina Núñez del Prado, who regarded it as an unseemly and intolerable accompaniment to the show of her work in the upstairs exhibition room of the same institution: in the run-up to the inauguration of *Mimuy* she demanded the suppression of certain parts of that Environment, under threat of withdrawing her own work.

Acha comments on the incident occasioned by Núñez del Prado as being within her rights as an exhibitor –rights demanded, in this case, by force– even though the act of suppressing another’s work could be considered, by the critic, unworthy of an *artist*, and in so doing marks a peremptory distance between the two nouns. But he also suggests that the creators of *Mimuy* were wrong to acquiesce to that demand, thereby mutilating their work. The work thus generated everything from affronts and censorships of this kind to the cynically pedantic sarcasm poured out by the previous commentator. As Acha indicates: ‘Of course there was no lack of the “solemn”, who spoke of decadence; or of the haughty, who condemned: the same people that rejected social justice because it had already been effected elsewhere and was, in any case, a despicable internationalism.’<sup>5</sup>

### **The City and Deterioration**

In the Cultura y Libertad gallery, Luis Arias Vera presented his second one-man show in Lima under the title *Scenography for an urban folklore... and ambient shelter for a series of paintings on meta-mor-phosis*. In this show, the artist put the emphasis on works of open participation rather than finished objects. Thus, *Lima the capital of exchange* was the rubric that encapsulated a huge hut fashioned from cardboard, its surface pierced by three perforations like spy-holes, which were also signalled by the artist with inscriptions or slogans familiar from advertising campaigns of the time: we find the words ‘With 12 pack labels and 7 Sols [T.N. Peruvian currency]’ on a photograph of the hut taken on the day of the opening (in which we also see Mario Acha and Miguel Malatesta, who had, with Efraín Montero, inaugurated the Environment *Mimuy* the day before) [Fig. 5]. The work thus invited the public to observe, through the holes, the objects especially placed behind the cardboard wall.

The work's title is a parody description that acidly comments on a successful campaign then being run in the city of Lima as an endemic outbreak generated by various companies. These companies –with the impetus of the mass communications media– effectively increased sales of their products by rewarding the compulsive consumer with some superfluous object or other.

Arias Vera thus placed next to the perforation a label from some brand, and on the other side an elementary object, which the spectator discovered by looking through the spy-hole. However, the price for carrying out the transaction demanded in the inscription was –continuing a kind of caustic humour– quite a lot more than the standard price of the product in most shops.

The artist deployed a similar irony in another work, this on paper, entitled *Genio-G-Rama gigante*, in which he tested out his own version of the homonymous, massively popular pastime introduced a few years previously by one of the country's leading newspapers.

As they still do today, the successive numbered issues of the crossword rewarded the winner with a sum of money, the lucky contestant being selected at random from all the right solutions delivered to the newspaper's offices before a certain date. At the time, however, what was most remarkable was the unexpected passion of the public's response to the game, which subsequently enabled the same newspaper to refer to the 1960s as 'the decade of the geniogram' (*El Comercio*, 1970). This mass acceptance was based not so much on the cash prize offered as on the participants' desire to test – and, with luck, to demonstrate– their knowledge. <sup>6</sup>

Arias Vera parodied the phenomenon by mounting on his *Genio-G-Rama gigante* a poster offering a picture from the exhibition to whoever managed to resolve it correctly [Fig. 6]. The site of the exhibition was thus transformed into a particular cultural spectacle: the images visible between

the enlarged squares of the specially designed crossword served to underline a pointless and increasing mass (or specialized) iconophilia.

Far from consolidating the widely held opinion that regards the avant-garde of the time as an ingenuous appropriation of themes borrowed from international art, and far, too, from subscribing to the narrow view that qualifies his work as an imitative art without a trace of local referents, this exhibition by Arias Vera marked the early moment of immersion that at the same time incorporated and engaged concrete components of the reality. Several of the works in *Scenography for an urban Folklore...* constructed ironic portraits of customs inscribed in various aspects of the day-to-day city life. Thus, the artist inoculates in the exhibition venue –at that time restricted to the contemplation of works of art– simulations of the social phenomenon, alluding to the already growing alienation produced by consumerism or the public's supposedly participative role in competitions, translating a set of familiar situations into the register of parody: a work entitled *The Procession* invited the visitor to pass down a long and extremely narrow passage painted purple, at certain points in which there were smoking sticks of incense. With this work he set out to reproduce the physical experience of attending the multitudinous religious festival of the Lord of Miracles.

Arias Vera effectively diluted the alienation of an until then indistinct art from the world around it. Two works in particular are emblematic of this approach: one of these is the poster he put up in his show, with the inscription '...Ah! /And the Chinese on the corner...?' This was the start of a kind of itinerary –marked with intermittent yellow arrows painted on the floor– that would lead the spectator out of the gallery to the corner of the block, where there was a store or warehouse run by a Chinese immigrant and his family [Fig. 7], as a way of incorporating into the space of the

gallery an aspect of the everyday environment and the real.

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But the artist managed to go even further in this same process of creating friction between social and cultural imaginaries and spaces: a happening prepared for the opening night introduced the presence of a hired pickpocket who had to rob one of the guests of her handbag and run out into the street. According to the artist's plan, a few minutes after the theft, and in the midst of the commotion, he would walk in with the recovered bag. And though the thief would not achieve his purpose, in being finally caught, the act itself would shatter the passivity of a social event purportedly enlivened by the danger of the streets (Tarazona, 2006).<sup>8</sup>

The criminal from the slums and the shopkeeper on the corner, converted into substantive parts of the exhibition, thus denoted an attitude that called for a full interaction with the world around us, at the same time dissolving the boundaries of the gallery and of art. This was in line with a fragment of the somewhat more extended quotation from the French critic Pierre Restany that Arias Vera included in the exhibition catalogue:

[...] The artist of today sets his feet on the ground and procures the elements of an organic participation in the social body and in its technical, industrial and urban structures... / The art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is in the process of finding its second wind: FROM THE IVORY TOWER TO THE TOWER OF BABEL... (in Arias Vera, 1965).

In the same way, the show by Gloria Gómez-Sánchez that opened the following day in the Solisol gallery adopted a similar approach: she brought together a series of works assembled from waste, constructing a kind of visual manifesto against the painter's craft. The artist thus radicalized the matter painting had established her at the start of the decade as Peru's first Informalist painter.

Here, aggressive assemblages built up on meshes of metal and various supports, on which she placed objects and textures that assailed the still prevailing idea of good taste, posited an idea of the redemption of mundane materials by way of a renovation generated by art [Fig. 8]. *Yllomomo*, the title with which the artist underlined this concept, is the indigenous word for a swamp in Bolivia, where a native flower is nourished by the wastes that lie below the surface of its waters.<sup>9</sup>

In a defiant gesture she gave these works titles like *Funeral of a paintbrush* or *The death of painting*, and they reveal a personal creative process that evolved with her informalist works toward a gradual abandonment of and detachment from traditional techniques and supports: the brush placed in the middle of the former, or the metal can of white paint, spilled and crushed on the support in the latter, are more than eloquent [Fig. 9]. She even, as a reviewer noted, put up texts 'alluding to the death of the image, to the extinction of painting' in the entrance to the exhibition (Bendezú, 1965). Acha recognizes here 'an unequivocally subversive behaviour', a coherent process that, wrenched off the stretcher, assumes a commitment to the work of art not now as transcendent object but as 'testimony of an action' (in Gómez-Sánchez, 1965).

### **Veiled dialogues**

These exhibitions were aggressively criticized in an article by the poet Francisco Bendezú, who dismissed them as 'outmoded, reactionary and empty' schools of painting, reluctantly accepting them as signs of crisis in industrialized nations such as the United States, while considering them 'false and forced' in the Peruvian context: 'how are we to grant them citizenship in a country that is struggling to emerge from underdevelopment and still, unfortunately, lives in huts?' (Bendezú, 1965: 23). In this, the alarmed reviewer came close to the diagnosis proclaimed

by Marta Traba and simultaneously circumscribed the new art within the terms of the 'aesthetics of deterioration': a deterioration in which she transposes the material precariousness utilized by the young artists in their works into a condition of art disturbing decline (Bazzano-Nelson, 2005: 17-18).

If at that time Acha assumed then that these aesthetic practices were deployed as a transcending of geographical, temporary and cultural frontiers, by the 1970s he could imagine no better context for the presence of the avant-garde than countries of limited development such as Peru, in that they needed the avant-garde as a defence 'against the harmful effects of a longed-for industrialization' (Acha, 1971).

Nevertheless, it would be superficial to link the scene of the 1960s and of that the late 70s solely through in terms of their creative modalities, since both assumed and incorporated reality not as a referent but, significantly, as a raw material. Taking as an example the works of Gómez-Sánchez alone, we could establish that her strategy also consists in an 'ecological exercise of revelation of the umbilical cord that joins the waste of the city with the art of the city', to use one of the phrases with which Lauer (1980) presented the work of E.P.S. Huayco, a studio of artists generally regarded as the detonative moment of the non-objectualism in the eighties. These two contexts coincided in space, but have added, in the fifteen distance years that separate them, a shared indifference that has cancelled out several other affinities that had passed unremarked until the present day.

Lima, July 2007

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#### NOTES

\*. An earlier draft of this essay, with minor variants, was presented to the IV Congreso Internacional de Teoría e

Historia del Arte y XII Jornadas de CAIA. *Imágenes Perdidas: Censura, olvido, descuido*, in Buenos Aires, the minutes of which are published this year.

1. Among these is Juan Acha who, by his proximity to the scene he reports on and analyzes, as well as by the date of publication of his article, is the only one to be simultaneously a chronicler, early theorist and decisive active element of the moment he studies (Acha, 1971). Ten years later, at the Primer Coloquio Latinoamericano de Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano, held in Medellín, Alfonso Castrillón presented a first balance of conceptual art in Peru; unfortunately for subsequent studies, this was a summary with no visual documents to assist the imagination, other than for then recent actions such as *Lima en un árbol* and *Acción furtiva* (Castrillón, 1981). Many years later Gustavo Buntinx offered a rapid review of the experimentalism of the 1960s as a significant preamble to the study of the individual trajectory of the artist Jesús Ruiz Durand and, in particular, the posters he designed for the Reforma Agraria and the experience of Velasquism (Buntinx, 1997). Of these three, only Castrillón's is a sufficiently accessible and available study of the local scene. The exhibition *La persistencia de lo efímero. Orígenes del no-objetualismo peruano: ambientaciones / happenings / arte conceptual (1965 - 1975)* recently presented a series of works, photographs, descriptions and documents from those years, compiled over two years, that have offered the most extensive survey of the period to date. The brief catalogue of this exhibition is the basis for an in-depth study of the subject currently in preparation (López and Tarazona, 2007).

2. The relationship between that split and the context in which it occurred has given rise to a number of contrasting opinions. These are a reflection of the inherent ambivalences and contradictions of the regime imposed by the so-called Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces. The repressive aspects of authoritarianism and the gestures of

populist reform nationalism thus combined with a series of individual processes not assimilated to the idea of a direct cultural or political persecution or repression. The brief imprisonment of Juan Acha shortly before he left the country is perhaps one of the most eloquent signs of all this.

3. Three exhibitions that opened in different venues on three successive days –from the 3rd to the 5th of November– prompted the critic to announce them even before their opening.

4. 'A large coffin attracted the attention of Juan de Acha [sic], who on looking inside saw his own face in a mirror placed in the bottom, and greatly startled stepped back. Protruding from beneath a cabin, two legs in red stockings and a keyhole that invited a look, very curious Ricardo Grau bent down to see and found a crucifix floating in a pink atmosphere [Fig. 3.]. He straightened up, very serious, and looked all around him before moving on. Rosita Barrenechea, looking very attractive in a very intellectual outfit [sic], was contemplating the things that hung from the ceiling with an absorbed expression.' (Author unknown, 1965).

5. This signalling of objections to the exhibition on Acha's part is not, however, a closed defence against the relevance of this kind of proposal. On the contrary, with an eye to specific referents, to which Acha was attentive, the author claims that 'Mimuy is guilty [...] not of an excess of actuality, as many believe, but of the opposite: of its lack. There prevails an already obsolete literary tone: surrealistic surprises and incoherencies. The actual avant-garde is more heterodox: its forms are more direct; the objects rawer and more real; and it abandons manual work. We thus miss the concrete and overwhelming reality of the objects as the basis of the Environment' (Acha, 1965b).

6. As of February 1960, the Geniograma in *El Comercio* generated a habit that was reflected in a demand for a greater number of copies of the paper per person per day, in order to increase the chances of winning the competition, but also in a desire for celebrity that the paper initially

stimulated by publishing the names of the lucky winners on the front page.

7. This work has an inverse relationship, albeit without contact, with the installation by Oscar Bony entitled *La familia obrera*, presented at *Experiencias 68* in the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires in 1968. Bony put on a pedestal in the exhibition room a worker with his wife and son, accompanied by a recording of everyday sounds from their household, who remained there throughout. However, the Arias Vera work in Lima of three years before points in an opposite and complementary direction: the itinerary in the Arias Vera transposes the setting and the very status of the work (the pedestal and the exhibition room) to lead to –rather than signal– a dissolution of the ‘white cube’ that is thus opened up to the flat space of real life, without interrupting its course. In the 1960s, Chinese immigrants in Lima rapidly became traders, and took over a great number of shops and warehouses in the city.

8. Juan Acha attributes that failed act of the happening to an ‘exaggerated realist sense’ on the part of Arias Vera, who could, in the critic’s opinion, have achieved his purpose by hiring professional actors to simulate the situation (Acha, 1965c). For the artist, however, the simulation, though existing, would not cross that boundary. His proposal called for a full integration of the spectator into the immediate reality, which was in line the aforementioned *...Ah! Y el chino de la esquina...?*

9. The allusion to the flower (*Diospyros yomomo*) represents, according to the artist’s daughter, Amelia Gómez-Sánchez, a rebirth that emerges out of ‘the chaos and the pictorial death of an era’ (personal statement to the authors).

This text correspond to the presentation that took place at the Barcelona Workshop in May, 2007.

We can see the illustrated spanish version in the web of the project.

Miguel López López (Peru, 1983)

Resarcher, visual artist, curator and lecturer (Universidad Ricardo Palma, Peru)

Lines of work: Conceptual Art and Photography

Emilio Tarazona (Peru, 1975)

Art Critic, independent curator. Art lecturer / Researcher / Journalist

Lines of work: Contemporary Peruvian Art