

## A Conversation between Hernán Borisonik and Leila Tschopp

HB: References to usage, change, touch and resignification have a notable presence in your shows. Disguise appears both as a device and the sensation of disguising a practice. There is an ongoing play with subtexts. When looking at the pieces and part of the process, the idea (or the image) of the power of disguise—akin to political power—comes to mind, like the ability to pass a thing off as something else. A series of tensions are also present: between material and ideological, between what a thing is and what it seems to be, between the flat plane and space...

LT: I have been working with the idea of masking for some time now, with the power of disguises in general but also more closely associated to images, as one of their functions or capabilities.

I have an overall interest in practices that camouflage objects with a more inoffensive appearance or that secretly narrate their origin or history, where concealment strategies are employed for survival or resistance. I think about certain folk dances, like the roots of capoeira, for example, but also religious imagery's symbolism. Hidden meanings unfold in an interactive play, creating a subtext that does not become visible, but is nevertheless active in the shadows.

I am particularly interested in the potential of using one image to evoke another, associating meanings; to use an image in such a way that it drags other meanings along with it, calling up indirect or unsynchronized significations. You often don't know why a certain image insists on being represented, and I believe that it may have to do with this: a potential meaning that cannot be seen but does exist. An image is what it represents, but also all of the images that have come before it, all the images that surround it; every image brings its own history with it, along with *other*, associated histories. I believe that in this rhizomatic multiplication, a shift is produced, one that is present in many different experiences. It isn't always negative; it isn't a deception. It is a play of tensions, constructions and resignifications. I see it as an operation with a great deal of political potential, precisely on account of its constant dialog with subtext. This subtext is what passes for critical distance, as Rancière asserts; in my work it is handled openly, with no inclination to close in on definitions, but rather taking on the part that cannot be pronounced, which is where its critical power lies.

HB: Speaking of Rancière and reflections on the work of art, some new expressions regarding the art phenomenon have come up in recent decades, and one of the most important and interesting is that by Jean-Luc Nancy. This notable thinker proposed that "the arts" exist, rather than "art", just as "the muses" exist instead of "the muse". In a neo-nominalism of sorts (secular,

in this case), essentialism of any kind is rejected, with the statement that art in the singular does not exist aside from its existence as a plurality. In their origin and practice, the arts are multiple; there are works, there are artists and there are spaces. None of this, however, responds to “art” as a pre-existing thing, as an abstract idea, waiting to be deployed... In reference to painting, Ilya Kabakov also articulated a division—in this case, chronological—between forms that follow one other in sequence, such as icon, fresco, painting and installation, into which your work could be classified quite comfortably... Considering this, I pose two questions or points of departure: In the first place, does it seem to you that a concept that speaks of “paintings” (instead of “painting”) might help us to a certain degree to discover constant aspects and lines of investigation in your career that materialize in these exhibitions? And secondly, how would you define the dialog between your work and the performing arts, including dance, theater and performance? Do they serve you as input, or is there some other relation?

LT: At some point in developing my practice, the idea of painting as a more expansive discipline, in relation to others, began to interest me. This interest continued to grow, as different ways of producing works were defined, which brought along with them certain “themes” or related questions that would arise. Architecture and the theater were the first relationships that I was able to identify, primarily in connection with representing or delimiting three-dimensional space that was real and fictitious at the same time. For some time these interests appeared within narration or in images (an interior, a façade, a body inhabiting impossible spaces), to then spread into other terrain. When I began to work on the wall, painting took on and surrounded the viewer’s body, and with that decision, a line of investigation into painting as experience began.

It was essential to consider painting in a multiple sense (which is what I understand your proposal of the plural to imply) because that gave me the freedom to hybridize my practice, to use any element as needed without having to think about whether or not it was pictorial or whether it was good or bad painting, whether it fit into any particular tradition. Since I first began to paint, painting has been a code, a point of reference that offered contention but allowed me to think at the same time. Even today, it is what I most like to dialog with because it lets me both understand and be unaware of what I am doing. Painting implies an action, a presence, an overall idea which is what I am able to carry over to installation, and this is why I am so interested in Kabakov’s idea that painting has been subsumed into installation and that installation is one more instance, a new step in the history of painting. With an installation I can propose a fixed, two-dimensional image, like a painting, yet at the same time involve moving through it, multiplying points of view.

This simultaneous intersection between two and three dimensions produces a tension that I perceive as being quite potent; there are meanings that take on physical form, that are understood as the body moves through space.

Going back to what you proposed in terms of relationships between my work and other arts, I wouldn't venture to confirm a complete relationship with theater or other disciplines so much as I would say that my work has a tendency to move toward that conversation; as either a way out or a demand, the work incites me to think from the standpoint of these other places, but without being entirely familiar with them, without being a specialist.

HB: One thing that has always caught my eye in your exhibitions in relation to the theme of architecture or the performing arts is that when you enter, it is always like entering a theater. There is a complete image, an "event", a situation (almost two dimensional), a whole that is more powerful than the pieces themselves. How strong of an aspect is this for you? How does the space-outside-the-work enter into your production?

LT: I work more and more with the idea of a whole, of assembling a totality, an environment, a place. In order for this to work, each piece has to be autonomous, but fulfill a well-defined role within the space that makes up the installation. Each piece determines the position, material nature and dimensions of the other pieces.

In this sense, the architectural space, the exhibition space's inhabitable volume is a determining factor. It can give me clues as to what route I want to propose and what large movements I want to lay out; it can awaken a particular tone, physical sensation or memory. In any case, I glean information from it that is then elaborated in my work, where the original information is gradually lost or camouflaged, either transformed or relatively concealed.

The space "outside the work", the space around and behind it are all part of the piece, even in the case of a flat painting. When I make the layout of how each piece is positioned within the whole, thinking about the intervals is indispensable; it's every bit as important as thinking about the image in a painting.

Although there are some installations that are more sculptural than others, in every one I am thinking about the choreographic play between the pieces and the exhibition space. In *Disfraz* (*Disguise*), I was thinking about continuity of the triptych and the diamond mosaic on the wall, which one was tempted to enter but immediately rebuffed, expelled from the flat plane. In *Caballo de Troya* (*Trojan Horse*), the height of the exhibition space was what determined that the installation would develop in a compact way, from the floor up, within the Museum's concrete

structure. In *El camino del héroe* (The Hero's Path), both pieces push against the linear nature of the space, emphasizing it at the same time that they try to resist in the face of it.

HB: This spatial notion brings territory, terrain and topology to mind. There would seem to be certain traction or rigidity between what is together and what is separated. How do you conceive of the boundaries within the space of an exhibition? What place does the imaginary viewer occupy at the moment of planning an installation? Is it the viewer who synthesizes what is shown?

LT: As I was telling you, in the installations what interests me is thinking about the works' autonomy (considering each piece like a closed box) yet simultaneously how they depend on the whole. In this sense, the boundaries within the space are progressively laid out by the relationships I elaborate between pieces. How each one is situated in space, how far away, how close, how much higher or lower in relation to the others is determined according to the movement it has to make (move back, fall, rise up, push against or keep still). Though I generally do give precedence to one point of view above all others, I am very concerned with how well moving through the work functions, that there are other significant viewpoints. In making these placement decisions mentioned earlier, my intuition regarding the narrative role each piece plays also enters into the mix; it all has to make sense within that imaginary tone, the dismembered narration if I decide to use a platform, or to put in an object that is larger or smaller than the viewer. There are narrative as well as formal reasons to separate them into groups, to leave them on their own or to make them pertain to one grouping or another.

It's important for me to imagine that the viewer will be receiving this poetry by way of their body, that there are meanings that will reach them via an internal synthesis involving physical perceptions rooted in the body. It is important to me to think that viewers will only be able to access the work due to the fact that their body stands inside it.

On the one hand, viewers' experience of the work stems from being involved in his or her here and now, attentive to the path taken as they move through the installation space. On the other hand, they are also embraced by the world of fiction that the work proposes, introducing other space-time relationships. It is a two-fold experience that implies loss and awareness at the same time.

HB: In addition to these narrative aspects, it can be seen that formal aspects are handled with great care; the composition of the space, for example, precisely as it relates to staging and to

“being present”. In every show or exhibition space, there are a series of links and tensions between what one knows, what one sees and what one *feels*. Right now I would like to focus on the latter: on a tone, a vibration, a zone, an *emotional tonality* that emerges as soon as you enter. How do you think this dimension is put into play?

LT: In recent years, the issue of how to recover the body as central to the experience has become increasingly important to my way of constructing work; a body that thinks, desires, and registers far more than the intellect. I often ask myself if it would be possible to think without language because for me, it's very difficult to constantly be so mediated by a language that separates me from things in order to understand them. The absurd, poetry, meditation and dance have all been ways for me to approach things, to approach the world and to formulate questions in a different way. In this sense of a viewer who is present, contemplating a perception that comes with a body that weaves relationships between the pieces with its own personal associations, I also think of the possibility of having a voice. In this personal poetic act of creation (which takes place via the entire body), we both (author and viewer) exercise the power of our freedom.

In general, I want the image as a whole to have a certain overwhelming impact, to appear complete and mysterious, and perhaps on a more distant plane, sad or absent. For me the immensity of the plains has a characteristic mood that has to do with the illusion of completeness, of being able to see a semi-circumference of 360° and to be inside it. This calm, austere vastness makes us feel very much alone, cast into the loneliness of each person's own inner self. This isn't dramatic, but overwhelming, a very profound verdict. I find there is something of this in my own everyday experience; it isn't tragedy, but it is a state that implies a constant attempt to emerge from inside the skull. This is why I think that the work can also be read in this key, and not only in terms of how it operates in formal terms or those of discourse. There is something of that absence that claims a presence, and I would like it to be that of the viewer's body.

At the same time, I know that my work is not performative; it implies very controlled movement, which is, paradoxically enough, very fixed. The canvases propose static contortions and geometry detains any illusion of movement, as Saer says of the plains, but within the whole, the viewer's body continues to play a fundamental role in constructing the mental image that is taken away.

HB: It is a geometry closely linked to the organic...

LT: Of course.

HB: In the end, however, this “staging” also refers back to the fictional aspect of the work, to the deployment of “myth” that allows contact with reality. In this sense, the installation is presented not so much as a metaphor for something else as it is a place that has been created in order to be inhabited, to be there, so that a concrete presence might exist in an ungraspable place. What kind of place do you conceive the installation to be? As a place that is ideal, real, imaginary, utopian...?

LT: I am interested in the installation as an enclosed, total world, ideal. I frequently work with real, concrete references, that later wind up being masked, which gives them a phantom-like presence. I rather think of unrecognizable, Beckett-esque places, that awaken a far-off, imaginary familiarity.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of utopia in constructing this mental landscape. For me, fiction is a place of salvation, a place that allows for transformation. It is not an autistic refuge or an evasion, but a powerful place that allows the rules of the real to be subverted. When I set up relationships between non-related things or when I update disparate historical material, there is a dimension of these operations that I know and understand, but there is also a layer that remains inaccessible, and this is what structures an entire system that has a certain magic, managed by way of decisions that are rational but not only that. It is very curious, but this system works if one goes inside it, if one accepts the pact, regardless of whether or not it can be explained. To say that it works means that it makes sense, that it has consequences, that it provokes reactions.

I work with the idea of fiction as a platform for reading the real, one that proposes new references in order to read what is visible or can be enunciated, thus modifying the ways in which each person might be affected by experience. The work proposes a visual aspect in which it is constructed as fiction, producing dissent that can then modify our perception of emotional occurrences or the way that we relate to one another.

**Hernán Borisonik** is a political scientist, with a Doctorate in Social Sciences from the Universidad de Buenos Aires, where he teaches at the graduate and undergraduate level. He is a researcher with the CONICET and at the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (UBA). His field of research covers problems in political philosophy, economy and the sacred. He also works with issues related to art and aesthetics from theoretical and practical standpoints. He regularly participates in scientific meetings in Argentina and abroad, and has written over twenty articles in specialized magazines. He has contributed to various collectively authored volumes and published the book *Dinero sagrado. Política, economía y sacralidad en Aristóteles* (Sacred Money. Politics, Economy and the Sacred in Aristotle).