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On the Ephemeral Art of Celebration. From *arte efímero* to festive installations in Mexico City

Key words: Mexico, ephemeral art, popular art, *cartonería* (paper-mâché), *mexicanidad*, performance, celebration/festivity, Judas, Burning of Judas, the Day of the Dead, Alebrijes

Abstract

The main theme of the thesis "On the Ephemeral Art of Celebration. From *arte efímero* to festive installations in Mexico City" is the ephemeral art located in its natural place – festivity – and its significance in Mexican culture.

Mexican ephemeral art, being a form borrowed from Europe, belongs to the category of folk art on the one hand and, on the other, to performative activities subject to cultural institutionalisation. Located in its natural place – in celebration and festivity – due to its transient and transitory nature, ephemeral art does not leave a permanent thing, and if it does, it is representative of the moment in which it was created. The Author considers its three 'protagonists' (Judas, Death, and *Alebrijes*) and the artistic performances (Easter burning of Judas, the Day of the Dead installations, Alebrijes Procession) in which they take part during the festivals. The Author assumes that tracing the category of ephemeral art goes beyond a single research field, therefore it is a complex process and any changes reflect its dynamic nature.

Adopting such a point of departure led the Author to situate the practices –artistic performances– on the grounds of performance theory. The impossibility of assigning the aforementioned phenomena to a single phenomenon makes it possible to describe the studied subject in various, interrelated categories, such as play, game, ritual, spectacle, happening, paratheatrical performance or carnivalesque, as well as celebration/festivity, activities experienced in the sacred, artistic, ludic or sacrophanic order. The vast array of possible interpretations in which the indicated performances take place, gives the possibility to apply performance theory which, due to its inclusivity, allows to incorporate the constitutive elements of performances and to reject the superfluous ones. In order to present problems around the interpretation of performance theory, as well as to show its nature, the Author uses the metaphor of *Voladores*, an ancient dance ritual. The dancers, whirling around a *palo volador* (wooden pole), stagger around it in a circle. There arises the question: how in a theory that is so inclusive and draws inspiration from and influences many fields, one can avoid over-interpretation? What one can include in the circle outlined by *Voladores*? To answer that questions it is necessary to analyse the relationship between the anthropologist and the researched field, the links between art and performance: *voladores*.

In the First Chapter of the thesis, the Author describes the state of research on Mexican art and the terms used in her work. The key concept of *arte popular* is presented in the context of Mexican history and the process of constructing Mexican identity – *mexicanidad* – through references made both to the artistic explorations of the *pre-Columbian* era (the time *before*) and the artistic expressions of the Mexican people (Mestizos) in the *post-Colonial* time (the time *after*). In the following section of the chapter, the Author also focuses on presenting the relationships and contacts of so-called academic artists (including Diego

Rivera, Frida Kahlo and others) with folk artists, mutual inspirations that inevitably led to changes, especially in the artistic activities of the latter. The chapter ends with a conclusion that contemporary ephemeral art, as a traditional branch of Mexican art, has moved into the realm of artistic installation, performative or happening activities.

In the Chapter II of the thesis, the Author analyses the links and special relationship between art and festivity, the act of experiencing art and celebration. She further isolates the Mexican character of celebration and the influence of Spanish festivals, especially of the Baroque era, in which ephemeral constructions played a significant role, and which now make up the contemporary image of celebration in Mexico. Further on in this Chapter the *Voladores* metaphor is detailed, it interrelate the phenomena described by the Author with ephemeral art. By linking the protagonists –the *Voladores* dancers (Judas, Death, *Alebrijes*)– with performance theory, it is possible to show the convergences, of which performance is a common part. These performances, the author relates to the categories used by Diana Tylor. They can be read through the *archive*, the testimony of past beliefs, practices and attitudes, and the *repertoire*, the gestures located in the body (*embodied practices*). In this way, by bringing together elements from different and historically distinct cultures into a unified whole, the Author shows the dynamic nature of Mexican culture, fulfilled in fiestas and celebrations.

In the next three chapters there are presented ‘protagonists’ of the thesis –Judas, Death, *Alebrijes*– in their cultural and historical context located in the artistic performances: the Easter burning of Judas, the installations for the Day of the Dead, the *Alebrijes* Procession. On the one hand, the Author gives voice to the artists and presents their artistic inspirations, on the other hand, presents the political, cultural and historical influences that make up the current image of the performances described. The Author points out that Judas rituals as well as altars prepared on the Day of the Dead, especially the visual setting, are used to criticise social and political events. Humour and satire become a typical defence in the Mexican tradition of *burla* (mocking). In the last of the chapters dedicated to *Voladores*, the Author presents the story of the fantastic entities called *Alebrijes* created in the late 1940s by folk artist Pedro Linares. In honour of their creator, as well as the *alebrijes* themselves, in 2007 there was created a festival which is repeated annually up to this day.

The final chapter brings together the various threads used by the Author to interpret the described phenomena of the thesis. The title figure of Saint Anne, which was formed from a combination of wood and paper, hides inside fragments of destroyed documents written in Nahuatl and points to a metaphorical sixteenth century example of cultural violence.

The entire work has been organized in such a way to present ephemeral art in Mexican culture as a complex and constantly changing process. The Author shows how this extraordinary cultural artefact of short duration brings together different worldviews, merges discourses and, at the same time, is entangled with activities of a political, religious, sacrophanic and popular nature. The mechanisms that guided the Spanish secular and ecclesiastical authorities of the Baroque era in introducing ephemeral architecture and ephemeral inventions into the sacred play of adults were intended to demonstrate unlimited power. Its greatness was emphasised by triumph, victory and domination in every area of life and on every occasion, even death. As a result, it inspired awe, fear, amazement, ecstatic revelry and squandering of wealth. Ephemeral art was a plastic setting for celebration. This is no different in colonial and contemporary Mexico.

The main title of this work, *On the Ephemeral Art of Celebration*, which has been treated as a kind of play on words, also deserves an explanation. Ephemerality refers to the

category of fleeting act, to an art of short duration, usually destroyed or planned only for a specific event settled in fiesta. However, "skilful" celebration, giving unbridled joy as well as deep religious experience, is also kind of art. This is an art *per se* that gives the ability to enjoy spiritual and secular rapture. Celebration, on the other hand, is a moment snatched from the mundane, a time of passionate experience and rexaltation in suspended everyday life. In this sense, the time of celebration and the performance they are as ephemeral as the art used for it.