

Mariana Telleria. Against the Interpretative Vice.

Florencia Battiti

Abstract

With her project *El nombre de un país* ("The Name of a Country"), artist Mariana Telleria was elected, via an open call process, to represent Argentina at the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, accompanied by curator, art historian and educator Florencia Battiti. For the first time ever, the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship, through the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, effected a public and open call of distinct federal nature, receiving 68 proposals of Argentine artists from different parts of the Country. *El nombre de un país* abridges each and every sediment pertaining to Mariana Telleria's conceptual and operational world. Composed of seven monumental sculptures that act up as a punk, Frankenstein-esque bestiary, this project presents itself as a support for an intuitive transformation of things; as an archive of desacralized meanings where religious iconography, rubbish, fashion, spectacle and nature share the same horizontal hierarchy.

"With these sculptures I am interested in taking off from the form itself of every object that orbits around these big structures; what I'm trying to point out is that the only natural thing's actually the chaotic coexistence between living and inert objects, between culture and nature, between order and destruction. Each thing has its own soul, its formal imprint and its material history. There is tragedy in everything but in everything there is also life", says the artist. In words of the curator, "when Telleria's artworks set up a network between things and their imaginary worlds, she's actually proposing unforeseen connections between the multiple signifiers of our culture (the sacred, the domestic, the urban, the natural), lightning up, by friction or by mere contact, new gleams of meaning".

*"No es cierto que la poesía responda a los enigmas. Nada responde a los enigmas.
Pero formularlos desde el poema es develarlos, revelarlos. Sólo de esta manera
el preguntar poético puede volverse respuesta, si nos arriesgamos a que la
respuesta sea una pregunta."*

Alejandra Pizarnik¹

In times such as these, times of deep ideological and symbolic misery, the question about the possibilities for the poetic to emerge is a crucial one. The exorbitant expansion of consumerist culture, the escalation of social control technologies, the environmental devastation, the resurgence of fascism reshaped and the regulations of social bonding (even at its most intimate levels) through market procedures, are generally considered by the vast majority of people as "collateral damage" coming from a socioeconomic system that's supposedly aimed towards the greater good. Could it really be, as Fredric Jameson once put it, easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism? The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 installed both a set of prophecies about the "end of history" and the generalized assumption that there was no alternative to Capitalism, even to the point that it has become inconceivable to think of any other economic and social system designed to regulate human life. Countless literary and cinematographic dystopias describe pessimistic and distressing scenarios, where ultra-authoritarianism and capital coexist without conflict, just as concentration camps and coffee chains can perfectly coexist². These contrasting, irreconcilable and contradictory (monstrous) coexistences fly over the conditions of production of contemporary artists and, in particular, over the work of Mariana Telleria. Not explicitly or literally (Mariana does not make "political art") but insufflating their pestilent reality, their inevitable occurrence over every decision that is made, over every action that is carried out in pursuit of a poetic project. And while it's true that art is embedded on very specific—and sometimes quite powerful—market conditions, it is not less true that it continues to be a practice that has a hard time conforming to the state of affairs, as it proposes itself as a desiring intensity capable of rejecting any systemic formulation that poses as a fact.

During the last few years, the very notion of contemporary art has been challenged and examined by those artists who are not willing to take it as a categorical concept. Nowadays it is not just about roaming around different disciplines and languages as some kind of nomad but to work hand in hand with very complex systems of production, expanding the limits of what we consider contemporary art and constantly widening its coordinates of action. Thus, each new project that an artist faces is a new system that begins to organize itself; and if some discipline works as a foundation for an artwork, it does so just to be destabilized, to be used as a counterexample, as a starting point for getting lost.

Possessor of a compelling intuition (intuition understood as a kind of intelligence above reason), Mariana Telleria confronts, from this perspective, the construction of her own poetic project. I like to think of her body of work as a poetic project (some of her pieces suggest the conceptual density and concentration that only belongs in poetry), designed to escape from prefabricated truths. It wouldn't be wise to undervalue the overwhelming weight of the status quo that taints even the artistic practice, but what becomes evident when looking back to the path that Telleria has travelled is her firm disposition to shake off the ought self of contemporary art, as a wet dog shakes off the water from its fur.

When reviewing her last ten years of activity certain outstanding features arise, such as her remarkable sculptural-installational versatility, a peculiar attention to the more sensorial qualities of shape and a carefree, oscillating movement between the sketchy objectuality and the pristine manufacture. There's a will to be found on her works, a will to decompose the commonplace, to remove one's view far away from the functionality of objects and to extract the secrets from these very same objects, to make them speak an alien language. And of course, when utility becomes alien, signification turns alien as well, taking down the pre-established order and exposing the poetic (and the political) behind these artworks. How to unsee the shimmering poetic-political spark coming out from a king size bed that under the influence of a "Telleria Operation" becomes a war machine?



Figure 1: Morir no es posible [Dying is not Possible], 2013.
Fragmented Bed 125 x 210 x 170 cm
Premio Braque, Muntref, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

If inside every object resides, encrypted, its own subversive value, or to put it another way, if on each and every thing the latency of another identity is enclosed ("Every form retains life" according to Gaston Bachelard), then this faculty exponentially increases when objects are exposed to other objects. When Telleria's installations set up a network between things and their imaginary worlds, she's actually proposing unforeseen connections between the multiple signifiers of our culture (the sacred, the domestic, the urban, the natural), lightning up, by friction or by mere contact, new gleams of meaning. Sometimes that gleam takes place on a programmatic way within the public and/or institutional space on which the project was originally inducted, as it happened with "Dios es inmigrante"³, a piece erected on the premises where the old Immigrant Hotel operated during the early 20th century in Buenos Aires, now turned into the Museo de la Inmigración y Centro de Arte Contemporáneo of the UNTREF, or when she controversially intervened the Museo Castagnino in Rosario. The latter was a particularly unerring action ("Las noches de los días"⁴, 2014) as it achieved, with a minimal amount of resources (covering in black painting the facade of the museum), a great extent of social and political reverberation. Indeed, as part of a collective show that took place within the IX Iberoamerican Urban Planning and Architecture Biennale, Telleria temporarily covered with black painting the facade of the Juan B. Castagnino Museum, in the city of Rosario, kindling a fierce controversy around the relationship between contemporary art and the institutions that house it. As Alejo Ponce de León points out, "what Las noches de los días managed to achieve, besides revealing what was already there, was to establish—through violent disruption—the existence of "the public" as a force that actively builds up the social. When she paints the Museum black, what appears before our eyes, besides the Museum itself, is the public thing in all its contradictory complexity (...)"⁵.



Figures 2 and 3: Las noches de los días [The Night of all Days], 2014.
Intervention on the facade of the Museo Juan B. Castagnino, Rosario, Argentina.

Through her reinvention of the everyday matter, Mariana manages to pronounce a phrase of her own but lifting off from a given language; and with each new project she faces, she builds a system of signifiers, as if she felt the urge to bestow these projects with a unique way of being seen and approached to. To this end she draws upon the tension that blooms between the opacity of meaning comprised in her formal operations and the narrative inclination of the titles she chooses for her pieces. In fact, Mariana pays special attention to the conceptual complementarity between the constructive materiality of her artworks and the linguistic key that she puts into play when naming them. Thus, the titles serve as infinite lanes of meaning through which the spectator is invited to travel, with the hope that she or he does not choose any of them in particular, discarding the need to embrace a decisive meaning:

"I wish mankind would surrender before the mystery of the shapes without having to learn a thing," writes down Mariana in her notes, "but that's impossible: we opt for a stubborn resistance against incomprehension. Actually, incomprehension is a misunderstood treasure. I've always been very fond of not knowing, not understanding. I don't try to solve every mystery. This position of not wanting to know that much is what liberates me and drives me when doing something. It's almost as if through that attitude I could go unpunished when doing something. It is an ideological position. The original sin is wanting to understand everything".⁶

So, what to do against the interpretative vice? In both art and life the pursuit of meaning stands as an imperative, and even this very text is expected to cast a light of some kind over the actual meaning of the work at issue. Some of Mariana's observations generate a suggestive feedback with the ideas of Susan Sontag, the radical American cultural critic for whom interpretation is the revenge of the intellect against art. Sontag said that the obligation for critics should be to show "how it is what it is, even that it is what it is", instead of pretending to reveal its "meaning", since a work of art is not just about something, it is something, it is a thing in the world and not just a comment or a text about the world.⁷ In this very same sense, Mariana's poetic display firmly defends its own will and its resistance against meaning, with this paradoxical premise being the undeniable core of her art. How to otherwise make use of the rigorous operations of Neo-Conceptualism while infusing them with the disturbing and disconcerting mystery of Surrealism?

Ten years ago, when writing about Telleria's first solo show in Buenos Aires, Claudio Iglesias isolated a few tactics that the "conceptualismo sensible"⁸ was starting to use to overhaul itself, mainly its newly found approach to emotion as a force that didn't necessarily implied self-absorption or self-referentiality, making it easier for Neo-Conceptualism to free itself in order to tackle the pressing problems of contemporaneity⁹. "El nombre de un país"¹⁰ was the title Telleria chose to name that first exhibition at the Alberto Sendrós gallery and it echoes today, unharmed, on the Argentine Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale. A suggestive title indeed, as it's usually the case with the way in which she brands her artworks; a title that names but does not define and that (following the trend set up by the objects on her operative world) manages to cause new fluctuations within its new context. From where is it that the name of a country is declared?

Undoubtedly not from a purported national representation or identity but rather from the richness of a formal and conceptual ambiguity which invites us to imagine multiple conditions of possibility. "The name of a country is any country, every one of them, even those that do not exist or belong to the realm of fantasy or are products of literary, mythical processes," notes Mariana. "That is why I am interested in the condition of possibility that arises from the title, there are horrible countries and this is a horrible world, but there's also a potential to do something else, to live in other ways, to organize the bodies under other territories in other ways."¹¹ Who can genuinely think that an artist, through an art project, can represent a country? And, in addition, name that very same country... In the face of such incongruity Mariana resorts to her own archive, to the genealogy of her own exhibitions, and chooses a title that bounces insolently against the implausible.



Figure 4: El nombre de un país [The Name of a Country], 2009.
Exhibition view Galería Alberto Sendrós, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

But perhaps on this occasion more than on any other, Telleria decides to revisit her own repertoire of work looking up to propose a comprehensive account of her investigations: "It's not that the unexpected arrives from the outside world, information doesn't get me off guard coming from another place: I find it within my own research and on the memories that my practice gradually produces. Those things ground somewhere, like a sediment".¹² As if using a great sieve, she gathers the main formal and conceptual operations found on her own personal artistic history and keeps just the most effective (and affective) to build her creatures. As usual with the installational practice, the organization of space becomes decisive: when lining up seven sculptural volumes longitudinally through the rectangular arena of the pavilion, she lays out her bestiary as if it were a parade, a cortege or a fashion show ("with an haute couture attitude", she says), and designs for each creature a particular attire that transfixes into a dystopian landscape of our culture. The flesh and brawn of these beasts is made up from tree trunks, scrapped auto parts, weaves of both synthetic and natural fibre, wooden bed headboards, wheels and tires, thorns, medals, cross-shaped frames... An inventory full of nods and references to her previous work but that, in this case, reflects noticeable references to the world of fashion. Signifiers from a society in which the heightened imperative of consumption no longer needs to be coercive because it's now a matter of individual conviction.



Figures 5 and 6: El nombre de un país [The Name of a Country], 2019.

Exhibition view of the Pavilion of Argentina
58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia



Figure 7: El nombre de un país [The Name of a Country], 2019.
Exhibition view of the Pavilion of Argentina
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Figure 8: El nombre de un país [The Name of a Country], 2019.
Exhibition view Pavilion of Argentina
58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia

The linear arrangement of the pieces serves as an alibi to reiterate and emphasize in space, but also in time, certain gestures, certain formal operations, certain decisions (such as covering with mirrors the columns and one of the walls of the pavilion), just as a couture designer would do when devising the presentation of a new collection. Thus, all her creatures look different but bear similarities to each other; each and every one is the demonstration that for Mariana there's not a single, fixed way to combine shapes, materials and spaces, but nevertheless all of the sculptures belong to the same system. A system in which each formal and / or conceptual decision necessarily implies a series of consequences.

And as "only darkness produces monsters", ¹³ the general lighting of the installation is low and does not come from artefacts that are external to the sculptures but from the sculptures themselves. The baroque theatricality that Telleria's installation transpires is opposed by the vertex to the instagrammable speed of contemporary reality. Anyone who cruises through the Argentine pavilion should not only wait a few minutes for their pupils to expand and adjust to the suggestive penumbra in order to be able to see, layer after layer, through opacity, but also will have to slow down their internal speed and their eagerness for biennialist consumption to find the right spot for observation. This is what the system of significance that Telleria designed for this project calls for, as opposed to the quick selfie and the aesthetic experiences that can be googled.

"Through these sculptures I am interested in working on the basis of each object and pointing out that the only natural thing is actually the chaotic coexistence between the living and the inert, between culture and nature, between order and destruction. Everything has its soul, its formal imprint and its material history. There is tragedy in everything but in everything there is also some trace of life".¹⁴

Her crowd of modern Prometheus-like characters (or should we say her crowd of "contemporary Prometheus") cipher our cornered desires in the face of the vicious demand for optimization, success, beauty and efficiency that hangs over us, reaching even the most intimate aspects of our lives. These monsters doesn't look into the future but from a stalking future, as if they existed on a time loop.

Author Biography

Florencia Battiti is born in Buenos Aires on August 18, 1965. She is a curator, art critic and professor of contemporary Argentine and Latin American art. Since 2000 she serves as Chief Curator of the Parque de la Memoria, where she is responsible for the Public Art Program and the curation of the exhibition hall in which, for the first time in Argentina, shows by Bill Viola, Alfredo Jaar and Anish Kapoor took place. She is a professor on the MA in Curatorial Practices at Tres de Febrero University (UNTREF) and on the Art Department at the Torcuato Di Tella University (UTDT). Her field of study focuses on Argentine and Latin American art of the 20th and 21st centuries with a particular emphasis on the articulations between artistic practices, political practices, memories and human rights. In 2016 she won the Radio France Internationale & Radio Cultura Prize for the Promotion of the Arts in the Public Management/Institutions category for her Curatorial Program of the Parque de la Memoria. She is currently Vice President of the Argentine and International Association of Art Critics (AACA) and a member of the curatorial committee of the BIENALSUR, International Contemporary Art Biennial of Latin America, promoted by the Tres de Febrero University. She works and lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Notes

1. "It is not true that poetry acts as an answer to a certain enigma. There is no answer for enigmas. But to devise them through poetry is to reveal them, to unveil them. Only then the poetical question becomes an answer: when we risk ourselves to consider the answer being in fact a question." Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972) was an Argentine poet who ventured into visual arts driven by the surrealist artist Juan Batlle Planas. Among her most preeminent works are *La tierra más ajena* (1955), *Árbol de Diana* (1962) and *Extracción de la piedra de locura* (1968).
2. The image belongs to Mark Fisher. See *Realismo Capitalista ¿No hay alternativa?* (Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?), Buenos Aires, Caja Negra Editora, 2016.
3. God is an Immigrant.
4. The Nights of All Days.
5. Alejo Ponce de León, "A History of Miracles" in *Cosas y El mundo no existe*. Mariana Telleria. *Trabajos [Works] 2003-2018*, Buenos Aires, 2019.
6. Mariana Telleria, Notes, e-mail sent to the author on January 20, 2019.
7. Susan Sontag, *Contra la interpretación* (Against Interpretation and other essays), Madrid, Alfaguara, 1996.
8. Translator's Note: The conceptualismo sensible or Sensitive Conceptualism is a branch of Conceptual Art that flowered in Latin America all through the 90s. It applies a range of typical conceptual mechanisms to process the "intimate and subjective experience of the artist". Its usual topics include love, music, death and loneliness. Jorge Macchi and Gabriel Orozco are preeminent examples of this tendency.
9. Claudio Iglesias, "Un país posible", Buenos Aires, *Página/12*, August 2, 2009. Reprinted in *Cosas y El mundo no existe*. Mariana Telleria. *Trabajos [Works] 2003-2018*, Buenos Aires, 2019.
10. The Name of a Country.
11. Mariana Telleria, Notes, e-mail sent to the author on January 20, 2019.
12. Mariana Telleria. www.ruthbenzacar.com/artistas/mariana-telleria. Retrieved 01/26/2019.
13. Matilde Sánchez, "Verás reliquias en la chatarra," Interview with Mariana Telleria, *Revista Ñ*, June 15, 2019.
14. Mariana Telleria, Notes, e-mail sent to the author on January 20, 2019.