

***Between Word and Metaphor* • Fabiola Aguilar Díaz**

*“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me...”*¹

A child's defensive rhyme scorns an insult in an attempt to protect himself. An intangible refuge, it attempts to neutralise the teasing, but it is a false claim at being out of danger: words can indeed hurt us by enouncing vertical structures and channels of exclusion. Metaphors, forms of language and textual constructions that remit ideas and are used in art as a means of evoking, are frequently wielded in an impetuous way. “More and more, military metaphors have permeated descriptions of given medical situations. Illness is seen as an invasion by foreign organisms, before which the body responds with its own military operations, like the mobilisation of immunological defences; while medicine, as with the jargon of most chemotherapies, is ‘aggressive’.”² Through object-metaphors, the exhibition *Sticks and Stones*, presented by Barb Hunt, Richard Moszka, Dianne Pearce and Mindy Yan Miller, reflects intrinsic thoughts of a contemporary culture questioning power relations and segregation woven through the body, life and death.

Fodder. Empty army uniforms hang, each a defunct mausoleum contradicting its reference to the appropriated military institution. Demoted and dismantled from their pedestal and lacking tangible corporeality, they abandon their arrogant ranks and renounce their dignified aesthetics. It is another view, one that desecrates the institution's immutability and the military formations it alludes to. What does the artist commemorate here? A limp monument, intimate, at eye level: the uniforms are incomplete. The artist has taken on the chore of cutting them up meticulously, leaving only the seams. In this way, dismembered and nailed in a line like soldiers in formation, Barbara Hunt dis(arms) the military's institutional structure that

languishes in this piece. Commemorative remains are transformed into a space for remembering.

A futile site becomes significant in *One Year of Pills II*. Richard Moszka brings a phantasmal medicine bottle to the gallery and spills its contents everywhere. Medication in past tense: an account of what an individual diagnosed with AIDS took over one year. Medicine, as an allegory of combat against illness, mixes with the possible meanings of the military uniforms in the above-mentioned piece. The transformation of the medicine-object into the subject of aesthetic contemplation confronts us with reiteration and accumulation. Its plastic object-ness is represented two-dimensionally via self-adhesive vinyl that alludes to the indifference of the medication's aesthetics. It is hair-raising to look at all of them together and suddenly realise, upon sight of the overwhelming quantity, that we are standing before the memory of slow suffering administered bit by bit. A vinyl abacus marking the passage of an illness, it becomes a remedy against forgetting.

From industry and the products it produces to that of science and its didactic visuality, Dianne Pearce opens another window for the aesthetic contemplation of medicine: *Vast Regions of Domain*. Flyers printed on front and back, double sided. The resonance of instruction is achieved through explicit diagrams of those organs specific to speech, but which are here being surgically intervened. Invasion as therapy. Repugnant diagrams that, presented as advertisements, are stripped of any intent to seduce potential patients.

The diagnosis continues: on the reverse side of the flyer, quotations appear from well-known communication and language theorists. Our attention is now directed towards ideas developed by de Certeau, Deleuze and Derrida on this social phenomenon. The frontiers of language define the regions of domain, which she experiences daily as being imposed.³ The artist witnesses, from her position as a foreigner, this potential form of social interaction as a

communication barrier. In its role as a *decisive* institution, language is employed as a means of exclusion.⁴

Pearce integrates various texts to establish linguistic poles: “*Parotid Adenofibrome enucleation*” versus “*the need created the organ.*”⁵ She contrasts visual and textual medical languages to those of a philosophical, sociological or semiotic nature, pointing out the specialization of speech depending on the context in which it is used. Professional jargon becomes particular dialect. Speak the lingo or remain quiet. Silence is another form of absence.

black white: evocation of light and the absence thereof. Mindy Yan Miller outlines shadows on the wall emulating the mythical origin of painting according to Pliny the Elder. Strands of hair pinned to the wall to form human silhouettes, like an impression of the body that takes root in the wall. The remains of bodies radiate their meaning as the *locus* of waste which, pinned to the wall, remind us of Hunt’s *Fodder*: suspended remains.

Piercing formations that dissolve upon scrutinizing: a closer look and the contours vanish, revealing only the material itself. The material lightness of the hair contrasts with its symbolic weight: an organic trace; torn from its vital origin, it brings death to mind. The corpse—now Godless and free of science’s scrutiny—is beyond abjection. *It is death that infests life.*⁶ However, its poetic ghostliness dilutes its morbid allusion. The presence of absent bodies is created by the ritual repetition of inserting one pin after the other, as if the very death that is insinuated conjures up death once again.

splatter. The spraying of blood alludes to death, but this time overtly, violently. This body fluid evokes scatological fear and reminds us of our finitude. In this video, Moszka splattered blood forcefully, a gesture that reminds us of *Process Art.*⁷ A close-up of a shiny white background extends beyond the frame: a common lavatory, used day in day out, as a metaphor for the white canvas. The remains of the abject are imprinted on an intimate place:

stains, blood, dirt and sickness as an analogy for the impure.⁸ In contemporary society, this vital fluid implies contagion. What used to be seen in former times as an offering to the Gods now becomes a mortal stigma: infected blood as an allegory for deadly trans(fusion). “The effort to discharge this ailment that awakens so much blame and shame, from its meanings, from its metaphors, is particularly liberating, even consoling. But one cannot repel these metaphors simply by not using them. They must be brought into the open, criticized, punished, worn out.”⁹

An intimate ritual in memory of a father, as well as a cropped self-portrait, **Papa** is a small format image cornered between the wall and the devices projecting it. This piece presents a photograph of a child, Yan Miller herself, sitting on her father’s lap. A beloved spirit manifesting its presence. Phantasmagoria, resonating much like her piece *black white*. The camera focuses on a fragment of the artist’s face, tightly framed. We are invited to observe a private ritual: before our eyes, she eats the picture while we listen to a traditional lullaby being hummed. The camera stays close observing her mouth and the act of chewing. This mouth, which in Pearce’s work was a disembodied organ, is examined in its physiological aspect, as the beginning of the digestive process.

The body transforms food into substances the organism can assimilate, but what does the artist want to assimilate? This intimate act, barely whispered, is projected in Yan Miller’s direct statement: *“I was told by my father that it was a moral imperative that I stay Jewish, that I was not to assimilate, because six million Jews had been murdered and countless generations had been persecuted simply because they were born Jewish. I was tied to history through death”*.¹⁰

The Jewish people received, as their biblical mandate, the divine order to remember: zajor!¹¹ Yan Miller understands that she is marked by her beliefs, heritage and tradition, because her father’s mandate is to avoid being absorbed by the multicultural body. To *not stop*

being a Jew is a moral imperative and she ponders the implications of her legacy. It is a paternal pronouncement demanding she honour his memory and that of his ancestors, but at the same time it becomes a voluntary distinction in memory of him. Family tradition rules when faced with the conscience of diluting a race. Fear of ideological fusion is evident. The past becomes present in a beloved picture while a woman, in psychological and ethical confrontation, carries the painful memory of a whole people.

This work proposes a profound question that I think concerns all of us as individuals. Maintaining and promoting our traditions generates cultural diversity that holds within it the possibility of being different. Nevertheless, in an intertwined social structure these intentions are frequently modified. Distinction by class and cultural group has segmented cohabitation: in big cities, communities convene in neighbourhoods according to socio-economic brackets, thereby establishing a ghetto environment as a result of economic systems. It has now become a priority to learn to understand and accept the differences in much the same way *constructive metabolism* works: turning nutrients into living tissue.¹²

Antipersonnel: yarn that knits latent violence. As Barb Hunt craftily knits landmines, silence turns into destruction. Yarn interlaces rhythmically into a repetitive ritual, as the soft, warm material reminds us of the warmth of protection and refuge. But the mortal terrain shoots down this idea of shelter. Hunt knits dissonances that accuse these silent mines down to their depths below. Worried about humanitarian causes –by nature borderless– she dedicates herself to them to contribute to the creation of consciousness: knitting to reduce indolence.

Hunt continues interweaving contrasted meanings by producing her work in different gradations of pink, a colour associated with the feminine, as well as through the practise of knitting, socially *deter(mined)* as women's work. Interested in constructing identity, this work subverts the expectations assigned by society to the role of women. She continues to knit the

old fashioned way, but the piece of “clothing”, apparently delicate, is a sharp and incisive critique. The artist materializes another form of strength: that which rearranges symbolic elements to question the misuse of power.

Better Left Unsaid: denigrating or innocent, words constantly receive new meanings and broaden the possibilities of expression. Dianne Pearce, with her punched plastic strung on the ceiling, transforms the gallery into a fiesta of colour and folklore. It is a colloquial voice veiled in innocent words that hit us hard. A carnival of prose, where meaning is so well disguised it hides the punch. The work constitutes a cheerful aggression. Language institutions sanction, but social expressions mutate finding a place to speak their mind. Escape and leakage from language’s grip.

Moment, body and its evocation. The exhibition unfolds as meanings woven in and around the eight works, where language and its significations intertwine with visual and conceptual stimulations. Uniform, institution, silence and escape. A web of meanings that unite at distinct points, like a multiplied game of “snakes and ladders”. Ritual, memory, tradition and mourning. Versatile trajectories that join up in the artwork, senses that are recalled and repeatedly projected by the displayed objects. Waste, exclusion, abjection and death. Four artists united in one exhibition, *Sticks and Stones*, an unravelling of everyday experiences in the city, society and contemporary life.

Translated by Dianne Pearce

Notes

- 1 Colloquial child’s rhyme used as a defence mechanism when another is teaching him or her.

- 2 Susan Sontag. *El sida y sus metáforas*. Santillana Ed., Madrid, 2003, p 242.
- 3 “The notion of silencing has led me to research language and its supposed authority in determining inclusion or exclusion.” Dianne Pearce. On the gallery wall.
- 4 Peter Burke. *Hablar o callar. Funciones sociales del lenguaje a través de la historia*. Ed. Gedisa, Barcelona, 1996, 209pp.
- 5 Quotes used in the artistic piece *Vast Regions of Domain* by Dianne Pearce.
- 6 Julia Kristeva. *Los Poderes de la perversión*. Siglo XXI, Mexico City, 1989, p 11.
- 7 Anna Maria Guasch. *El arte último del siglo XX*. Ed. Alianza Forma, Madrid, 2000, p 40.
- 8 Julia Kristeva. Op. Cit., p 133.
- 9 Susan Sontag. Op. Cit., p 240.
- 10 From the artist’s statement of intent.
- 11 “The Hebrew bible does not vacillate when ordering one to remember (...) Together the verb “zajor” appears in the Bible, in its various inflections, no less than one hundred sixty nine times, generally with Israel or God as its subject, because memory corresponds to both of them,” in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zajor. La historia judía y la memoria judía*. Ed. Anthropos, Mexico City, p 2.
- 12 “Assimilation: the conversion of nutriments into living tissue; constructive metabolism”. The Free Dictionary by Farlex. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/assimilation>.