

## TRAVESÍAS (PASSAGES) In Pursuit of the Puzzle that Represents Us By Ana María Battistozzi

Many things led me to think that an exhibition of the recent developments in the work of Teresa Pereda should focus on the opening of horizons as vital experience, a notion that governs her work. On both literal and metaphorical levels, the horizon has been implicit in all of her production in the last sixteen years. It is present in the decided expansion that, minutely but steadfastly, encouraged the artist to move her work towards geographic, social, economic, religious and cultural exchanges. It is also present in the way she resolved the tension implicit in transforming her own artistic practice.

The ties that, from this gallery of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, she forges to bind Tierra del Fuego, the salt flat in Uyuni, Bolivia, and the Amazon attempt to bring to the public another –necessarily imperfect and ungraspable– instance of the committed expansiveness that, for so long now, has set this artist in motion.

The horizon is an enormously significant geographical particularity for Argentine culture; the country's visual arts and literature have both made extensive reference to it<sup>1</sup>. That wholly unattainable yet absolutely present imaginary line—as Adriana Lauría so aptly described in the

<sup>1</sup> This was one of the central questions of 8th edition of *Estudio Abierto*, in 2005, which included a number of shows, among them *Arquitectura, Buenos Aires y el río*, curated by Claudio Robles and Hernán Bisman, and *Argentina bajo la línea del horizonte de cara al río*, curated by Patricia Rizzo and Adriana Lauría. This latter show revisited and broadened the content of an earlier exhibition (December, 2000) at the Fondo Nacional de las Artes. In 2007, this issue was central to *Pampa, ciudad y suburbio*, the exhibition curated by Laura Malosetti Costa in Imago, the art space of the Fundación OSDE. For an overview of references to the horizon in Argentine literature, see Ariel Schettini, "Más allá del horizonte", in *Estudio Abierto. Experiencias de arte y cultura contemporánea Buenos Aires 2000-2006*, Ministerio de Cultura de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2007

text that accompanied an exhibition on the theme of the horizon<sup>2</sup>—has served, for longer than the last two centuries, as a projection of the most varied imaginaries born in this and other lands. It is well known that the vast plains that spread out in the four directions of our land have been the locus of the dreams and frustrations of legions of men and women who came here with a wealth of hopes that could not always bear fruit.

Much has been said and written about that, but little about the other truth of the Argentine “deserts”, spaces that were, in a certain way, emptied of their inhabitants and original flora and fauna to enable a European vision. An attempt was made to present these lands as deserts, for instance in the case of “the desert campaign”, the suggestive name given to the military campaign waged by General Roca in the territories in southern Buenos Aires province, and the aftermath of tensions still felt in its wake.

Perhaps therein lies the reason that Teresa Pereda, who spent part of her childhood in a wool farm in what is now the province of Neuquén, made these problematics the core of her work. Starting in the early 1990s, the artist has worked intensely towards understanding a place and belonging to it in terms of the relational structure of its inhabitants, which gives shape to her daily life. She was driven to embark on a thorough exploration of the diversity that constitutes us by a profound interest in the intersection of expectations, lifestyles, needs and beliefs that form our multifaceted identity. This same impulse led her to place her poetic at the convergence of the aforementioned horizons and imaginaries.

Evident as early as 1994, when she first traveled to the town of Yavi, in Jujuy, a project that she continued a year later in Los Alazanes, in Neuquén, was her emerging curiosity about ritual, an eminently communal practice, that would later play an important part in her work and form a central chapter in this exhibition<sup>3</sup>. Her longstanding interest in the beliefs

<sup>2</sup> See Adriana Lauría, “¿Horizonte lejano?”, in *Estudio Abierto*, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring, here, to the coupling of gathering and restitution which is the cornerstone of this exhibition. Gathering refers to the requested soil which constitutes a symbol of belonging. Restitution is the delivery ceremony that makes possible multiple encounters. In 1997, Teresa Pereda visited and interviewed Gabriel Cañicul, second Mapuche chief of the Cañicul tribe, who gave her soil for the first time

of each culture is also felt —and then affirmed and refined— in her wholly dynamic experiences in the Yatana forest, in Tierra del Fuego, in 2007; in the salt flat in Uyuni, Bolivia, and in the Amazon, in 2008. Together, these experiences constitute the crux of her recent *Citas por América* (Appointments around the Americas). The time and distance that separate those first two locations and the ones that we witness in this space are part of a single and far-reaching calling, one awakened in the artist so many years ago and so harmoniously developed in the work seen here.

### **Participation: Individuals, Groups, Communities and Work Teams**

I would like to emphasize the expanding perspectives in Teresa Pereda's work on the basis of certain specific and interconnected developments. Firstly, her work with people in relation to spheres that Teresa is particularly concerned with, like daily work and beliefs. Second, the careful choice of materials, crucial to forging a connection between cultures: soil, first; wool, second; and oral narration throughout. And, finally, the landscape in terms of the energy emitted by natural sites considered places of worship.

In terms of each of the above, I am interested in investigating her work and its meaning as an expansion of awareness on the basis of the principle of participation: individuals, groups, communities and work teams that, from varying perspectives, influenced, reflected or participated in Pereda's artistic practices<sup>4</sup>. Her work, which from the onset grew out of what Mercedes Casanegra described as an anthropological intentionality<sup>5</sup>, took a decisively participatory turn that displaced the role of observer and producer, moving towards the interpersonal relations that she articulated time and again. As one might imagine, this process did not entail contraction in terms of media and mode of production, a facet of her work that became particularly significant in the experiences that

<sup>4</sup> This is evidenced by the dedication with which the artist names each and every participant in the actions, and the recognition she gives them for their specific contributions.

<sup>5</sup> See Mercedes Casanegra, "La tierra potencial. Los itinerarios de Teresa Pereda," in *Teresa Pereda. Tierra*, Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 2008.

she shared with Charly Nijensohn and Juan Pablo Ferlat in Bolivia and the Amazon. On those occasions everyone involved, including the locals, functioned as producers, actors, and living matter, so to speak, for ritual shared or conceived by Pereda.

“I was moved by the intention to establish a system of communication not strictly verbal or visual, but one more profound, intimate and direct. A state of being and feeling the world and its energy that is transformed by the possibility of sharing an action,” affirms the artist at the opening of this catalogue. This statement expresses the importance of interpersonal connections insofar as they become the means and material of her work.

This aim necessarily entails a certain distance from the production of a formal object for a viewer. Instead, the work is conceived as a space of reflection, a site of convergence whose anticipatory nature—in the words of the artist—“sets off desires and shared common interests, and sketches possible futures.”

It is not by chance that this turn in Teresa’s work took place in the early 1990s, a significant moment when, using different strategies, many artists the world over felt the need to pursue common ends<sup>6</sup>. Regardless of their varying problematics and distances, the reason for this need surely lies in the saturation of the success-centered discourse that accompanied economic globalization that never meant a real globalization of wellbeing. Or perhaps it lies in the profound crisis in social and personal bonds, which the new global order did, in fact, manage to impose. In any case, at that moment it became more meaningful to many artists to pursue instances that might enable a restoration of those bonds than the subject-object based aesthetic experience that had reigned since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>6</sup> Starting in the 1990s, numerous artists’ projects emphasizing social participation appeared. Generally speaking, these projects take place in everyday, and mostly urban, environments. In relation to these artistic practices, the French theorist Nicolás Bourriaud published *Esthétique relationelle*. Based on these practices, the premise of Bourriaud’s theory is an art that formulates “the sphere of human relations and their social context as a theoretical horizon.”

This is the context in which I would like to place the work of Teresa Pereda. I will venture a broader approach to her work in light of the crisis of the aesthetic discourse of modernity, which was attacked on many fronts starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These attacks were largely due to that aesthetic's limited conception of reality, which was based on the notion of the autonomy of art and hence contributed to isolating the aesthetic experience from its context. But even more important, these attacks were due to the fact that the modernity's aesthetics had accepted and partaken of the principle of "instrumental rationality" imposed by positivist modernism, the effects of which are still felt.

Although none of that seems pertinent to the current work of Teresa Pereda, it is relevant because it places her work in the context in which it arose, a context that her work necessarily modified and was modified by.

### **Towards a Dialogical Reason**

To delve further in this direction, I would like to discuss Rana Nergis Ögüt's analysis of the dominant influence of instrumental rationality of modern positivism on much of 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic discourse<sup>7</sup>. What are we speaking of when we speak of instrumental rationality? Among other things, of the consequence of what Heidegger called the "technological point of view," which played a decisive role in modern thought —and, we now know, beyond—. Instrumental rationality conceived the world as a reserve available for the tutelage and arbitrary use of whoever exercises power. But the concept of instrumental reason, which was developed by Adorno and Horkheimer as a consequence of the Second World War, is broader. It goes back to those philosophers' criticism of Enlightenment thought, which, in its drive to free man from mythical-religious thought by means of reason, subjected him to the dominant logic of scientific reason. For these two Frankfurt School philosophers, that form of "reason," now a supreme and all-encompassing principle, meant considerable

<sup>7</sup> Rana Nergis Ögüt "A Phenomenological Critique of 20th Century Aesthetics", Sanart International Symposium on Art and Aesthetics, Ankara Junio 2001

impoverishment of human capacity by subordinating all other spheres of knowledge to its scientifist logic. Indeed, it also subordinated individuals, their intimate appetites and needs<sup>8</sup>.

Indeed, the paradigm of positivist rationality, initially based on the methodology of the natural sciences and readily affirmed over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became the model for human cognitive activity; because eminently subjective and not available to objective confirmation, aesthetic concepts relative to art, artistic truth and intuition lost importance. This had a striking impact on man's connections to the world, which were reduced to a set of technical operations akin to that positivist conception so instrumental to the principle of domination.

Hence, the fragmentation and hierarchy between the sciences of the spirit and the sciences of nature, as well as the wrongs committed by colonialist projects in the name of the ideology of progress. And hence the reaction of the first negative avant-gardes, which at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century questioned positivist rationality, as did numerous intellectual movements that, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, set out to deliver to that positivist rationality its death blow<sup>9</sup>. Along these lines, Rana Nergis Öğüt emphasizes the role of phenomenological criticism, which proposed the alternate principle of *dialogical rationality*. Unlike the positivist model, which supposes an isolated subject, *dialogical rationality* conceives of the subject as part of a dialogue. The crux of this new paradigm is the principle of intersubjectivity that, according to Nergis Öğüt, coincides with the phenomenological idea that reality is not "a mere collection of facts, but rather a rich and dynamic world of qualitative entities where meaning is built on the basis of the creative and critical acts of those participating in its ongoing reconstruction."

<sup>8</sup> Max Horkeimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialéctica del Iluminismo*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1987. (English title: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.)

<sup>9</sup> Particularly significant of these negative avant-gardes are Surrealism and Dadaism, and of the intellectual movements, phenomenology and structuralism.

This overcoming of the positivist encyclopedic tradition that attempts to remove any trace of irrationality or mysticism from anything that is not expressed by means of rational discourse is the basis for my discussion of the meaning of Teresa Pereda's actions. Mostly certainly, the puzzle of the meeting of cultures that, for some time, has been her principle focus is born from a cluster of tensions that demand a change in the structure of the values of inherited reason.

Her act of gathering soils is antithetical to the taxonomical logic of science. In fact, it is its flipside, and not only because that act, as formulated in this work, is intrinsically bound to the act of restitution, which is highly significant to the reversion of the logic in question, but also because, unlike scientific reason, which stands at a remove in the interest of "a better assessment", these actions are also intrinsically bound to their medium and origin. Hence, Teresa chooses the modality of the ritual to carry out her *Citas por América* because of its deeply rooted nature and its participatory quality as a known and oft-repeated representation.

But her work goes even further: it is the medium that allows her to bind and resignify life stories in a great narrative—one more poetic than anthropological—, interconnecting places as different as those belonging to the Quispe family, part of the Aymara community in Jaruma, Bolivia; to Gabriel Cañicul, part of the Mapuche community in Huechulafquen, Patagonia; to Jordi Roset Aura, from Casa Marxant, in the Catalan Pyrenees; to doña Cecilia Moreira de Cestac, from Azul, Buenos Aires province; to don Dionisio Duarte, from Oberá, Misiones; to Tránsito Tomás Campillay, from Ojo de Agua, Córdoba, and to Marcia Regina Costa du Nascimento and Vicente de Paula Moraes. Thus, it is possible to bind the legends of *Curupira*, *Boto vermelho* and *Mapinguari* from the Amazon, with the stories of the weaver Ercilia Moreira, granddaughter of the La Pampa cacique Manuel Grande. While wool and soil might be the material for these exchanges, it is the passage and narrative of the medium that joins them.

Everything seems to indicate that, in her different creative and critical acts, Teresa Pereda does not put this puzzle together, one piece at a time, in pursuit of a totality but rather in order to reconstruct the partial meanings according to the aforementioned principle of dialogical reason. Hence, in Teresa's work what serves to facilitate relations with the other matters as much as what each party brings to those relations.

### **Soil and Wool**

Soil and wool, two materials that form part of the artist's personal history, occupy an essential place in this logic of exchange. Teresa believes that those two elements possess vital energies: "soil —sought, gathered, offered— and wool —spun, stretched and interwoven—," as she herself says. As natural as water and air, and so different from contemporary consumer-cultural objects simply by virtue of being at a remove from that culture, these two materials take on a special power in order to partake of the rituals and endless nexuses that the artist proposes. Most certainly, the participatory aspect of Teresa's work is central, crucial to evaluating her strategies for symbolic production. The detailed preparation that she does before each of her *Citas por América* in the interest of ensuring a maximum of participation in even the most minute details leads to a procedural and performative dynamic that entails an array of instances, actors and practices. I would even venture to say that these instances and their course are, at times, as interesting as the work itself. Perhaps that is one of the primary problems we faced in attempting to imagine this exhibition. How to tackle in a single sphere, regardless of how broad it might be, the wealth of dynamic collective experiences that took place in settings as splendid as they are removed from each other? How to truly capture all this that we are speaking of?

Let's take, for instance, what happened in April of 2007 in the first appointment that took place in the Yatana forest on the occasion of the I Bienal del Fin del Mundo in Ushuaia<sup>10</sup>. The artist had foreseen certain things, but not others. She got in touch with people from the local community who work on the preservation of a small forest, the last refuge for

a native species of wildlife, and with representatives of the native peoples. And as on other occasions she had investigated the correspondence between each proper name and its land of origin, here she traced the origin of the name *Yatana*, which means "to weave" in the Yaghan language. This information changed the course of the soil-gathering ritual that she had been performing: it led to the inclusion of wool. Thus, Teresa took to Ushuaia thirty-eight kilos of wool with which she made a ball that she gave to the people. They set it rolling through the forest and spontaneously began a weave that included trees and people, a construction that brought the place a wealth of new meanings.

I would venture to call this a *transformation in a construction*, the term Hans George Gadamer uses to define the turn by which human play reaches its truest state of perfection, which is art. The German philosopher has compared the modality of play (*Spiel*), its way of being, with that of a work of art in that both alter those who take part in them. Thus, he first and foremost removes from the notion of play the subjectivist connotations that have dominated references to it in the fields of aesthetics and anthropology. Playing is always representing, Gadamer maintains. And what is represented does not depend on the subjectivity of those who engage in the play, but is, rather, manifest as its own entity<sup>11</sup>, as in a play of lights or a play of forces. Or that construction in the Yatana forest, which exceeded the individual intentions of the participants.

What am I trying to get at with this? Basically, thanks to the play of art, what once was became something else, and that transformation is its truth, as the truth of the actor playing Hamlet is being Hamlet. The represented play speaks to the viewer from the reality of a representation of which the viewer also forms a part, even when he stands before it. This is

<sup>10</sup> *Otro mundo es posible* (Another World is Possible) was the theme of that first edition of the Biennial. Both of the editions held thus far have attempted to draw attention to a world less and less concerned about the future, especially in relation to the urgent problems of conserving nature and social bounds.

<sup>11</sup> Hans George Gadamer, *Verdad y método*, Salamanca, Ediciones Sigueme, 1993, pp. 150-154. (English title: Truth and Method.)

clearer in a type of representation that is a worship-related action, that only means something to the community that participates in it. Hence, it's not by chance that Teresa Pereda works on the basis of this model by replicating the modality of ritual as a meaningful whole that can be represented time and again and understood in different places.

Thus, a few handfuls of soil from four regions of Argentina and a good many kilos of Patagonian wool were part of the rituals of exchange and the offering to the Pachamama performed by Teresa and her team before they entered the salt flat of Uyuni, in Bolivia. These elements also facilitated their participation in the local Aymara ceremony of "flowering the llamas." Once again Teresa, the soil, and the wool in a ball rolling through the waters of the Amazon; soil from four regions of Argentina, that she took along with her and gave to the locals, in exchange for which she received soil from a local garden and a wealth of legends.

It's important to point out the difference between an artistic practice that adopts the modality of a ritual, as part of a significant attempt to salvage a representational heritage, and the religious ritual as such, or the ritual of the community in itself. This will most likely be more diaphanous in the experience planned for the four stages of the project to take place in the framework of Teresa's installation in the sala Cronopios. There, the appointment has been conceived as the *collective construction of a space-time of encounter and conciliation*. Thus conceived, the art experience sums up and attempts to convey everything learned and experienced in years of passages, encounters and exchanges with other cultures. It will most certainly give rise to a truth different from religion and science. Since its reason for being is (mutual) understanding through an experience that alters its participants, it must go beyond the autonomous territory in which art is envisioned as a kingdom solely ruled by the laws of beauty.