

“Victor Grippo” *artUS* issue 17, 2007 March-April.

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These days, it is increasingly impossible to view vegetables without being reminded of their energy potential. Just as scientists now debate the merits of ethanol fuels derived from sugarcane, sugar beets, switch grass, sorghum, or corn, the Argentine chemist-turned-artist Victor Grippo (1936-2002) proposed potato-powered products. As a young boy, Grippo (no relationship to Grippo Potato Chips) had already rigged a radio to run on potatoes, a feat he repeated in 1972 as art, twelve years before Joseph Beuys's lemon-powered light bulb. *Time* (1991) demonstrates a small LED clock running on four tubers, which register 0.7 volts each. One cannot ignore the political significance of this pre-Columbian root vegetable, which has evolved into a staple of nearly every society's diet. Raised in one of Argentina's most fertile regions, this Italian immigrant's son sought ways to imbue his conceptual practice with his humble origins.

Grippo's most famous body of work, the series known as *Analogies*, consists mostly of long tables piled with scrupulous spuds, each connected to electrical wires leading to a voltmeter, whose switch one once flipped to compute their electric potential. Wanting to draw an analogy between potatoes as a source of electric energy and inner feeling as a source of conscious energy, Grippo couldn't foretell that today's audiences wouldn't be permitted to push buttons to measure such high-dollar voltages. However revved up these piles of hot potatoes are (and one imagines biologists having since generated super spuds capable of transmitting even greater voltage), they lay rather dormant. When the voltmeter registers zero, there's something rather disheartening (or perhaps revealing) about our current lack of conscious energy. This stillness was built into *Analogy IV* (1972), whose three transparent Plexiglas potatoes, plate, knife, and fork exhibit a standoff with their real-life doubles. *Synthesis* (1972) proposes an energy race between a potato and a similarly shaped lump of charcoal.

While *Man Naturalization, Nature Humanization, or Vegetable Energy* (1977/2004), a long table holding piles of sprouting tubers, surrounding seven laboratory flasks filled with colored liquids and an eighth with fermenting potato bits floating in alcohol, resembles the *Analogy* series, its wireless atmosphere engenders serenity, setting it apart from those unruly tables sporting sprouting batteries. His calmest tabletop trial remains *Todo en marcha (Indice del movimiento general de los seres y las cosas)* (1973), consisting of five reaction flasks containing colored salt solutions, five crystallization jars, rotting potato-bit vapors dissipating into a Wolf Bottle, and five potatoes ranging across the sprouting cycle. Accompanied by a text chronicling Western society's cosmological theories, this work paradoxically forecast that era's quiet before the storm. The resignation of the president-elect in 1973, after Argentina's first publicly held election in a decade, paved the way for Peron's return abetted by his third wife (and future veep) Isabel. In this context, *Todo's* flasks read as political candidates, its vapors the soured electoral process, and its sprouting spuds the electorate. Working improvisationally during the 1994 Havana Biennial, Grippo scrawled familiar Argentine texts onto seven student desks, remnants of Cuba's 1959 literacy campaign. Dimly lit by hanging bulbs, the desks hold a few obscure objects.

Potatoes were not his only edible source of inspiration. In 1972, the police destroyed the traditional rural earth oven built by Grippo, Jorge Gamarra, and A. Rossi to bake bread, which they served to nearly 5,000 passersby for free. Its accompanying pamphlet

instructed readers how to build such an oven, which could double as a bomb shelter, anti-nuclear bunker, or home. Even though curator Jorge Klugsberg had obtained official permission to hold an open-air event on this busy Buenos Aires plaza, the bakers' generosity apparently threatened the government, perhaps because the gift's popularity reiterated hunger's prevalence. *Homage to the Constructors* (1978), a nearly 12-foot-tall, anomalous dough-like structure sited in a busy square, was his next sculpture to challenge that era's repressive military government. Made from Portland cement and an aggregate of sulfate salts, this bizarre anthropomorphic protuberance, embedded with various bricklayer tools, actually stabilized chemically as it withstood the elements.

His last work to explore foodstuffs, *La comida del artista (Puerta amplia--Mesa estrecha)* (1991), entails white French doors swinging open to encase six stools and a very skinny, elongated white table, whose five plates host a golden egg, a black egg, several charred toast slices, and altered veggies, while a solitary black plate hosts a white egg. My favorite, though, is the incredibly basic *Life, Death, Resurrection* (1980), consisting of two sets of lead volumetric containers (cone, cube, cylinder, pyramid, rectangular prism), one empty and the other filled with black beans. The addition of water germinated the beans, leading to exploding lead bombs. Compared to the lifelessness of otherwise empty minimal forms, such a simple gesture proposes gardening as a revolutionary, boundless event.

Writers routinely compare Grippo's material preferences and poetic processes to those of arte povera participants, yet his works placed a greater emphasis on human capacity, both in terms of potential and ability. His practical can-do spirit thus shares a clearer kinship with the elder Marcel Broodthaers's pot-moule sculptures and shell/eggshell paintings, and the younger Georg Herold's caviar/brick paintings and underwear sculptures. Even so, *Some Trades* (1976), in which Grippo displayed the everyday tools of "five traditional manual occupations"--blacksmith, stonemason, carpenter, farmer, and bricklayer (all tools that were equally central to his atelier)--specifically recalls an arte povera sensibility.

Grippo often employed everyday materials and investigated indeterminacy, yet his use of particularly familiar materials and subject matter made his work even more audience-centered than arte povera ever was. In fact, Grippo was among the first artists to articulate his goal to engage public participation. For the influential group exhibition "Investigations into the Creative Process" (1966), Grippo exhibited *Sistema (System)*, whose stated aim was to explain the hypothesis: "The work of art is made up of the artist [transmitter], the material of the work [channel] and the public [receiver]." This work's final panel (Panel 4: Public-Recipient) featured photographs of a viewer having multiple reactions to the exhibition, which Grippo had hoped might encourage alternative responses. Two of his fascinating circuitry paintings were included in this survey. Originally exhibited in a 1966 solo exhibition, he repackaged six such paintings as Panel 3: Continuing, the third element comprising *Sistema*.

Lest you imagine that Grippo's works were either provisional, ephemeral, or pret a composer, rest assured that he designed dozens of sturdy shadow boxes, most of which remain in private collections. This survey featured eight such encased works, including the multiple *Some Trades* (1976), a portable souvenir of the sprawling installation of the same name, and *Carpenter's Little Table* (with unfinished letter) (2001), which offered a collectible version of his carpenter's sprawl. Three works under glass, titled *Anonimos* (Anonymous) (1998/2001), contained clusters of white, penis-like,

amorphous painted-plaster forms. Of particular note are the numerous boxes featuring plumb lines, a favored material during his career's last two decades, when he was most focused on the shadow boxes. These boxes, which physically explore equilibrium, balance, weight and gravity, echo his earlier preoccupation with mechanical systems and chemical reactions.

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