

Magdalena Atria's dialogic abstraction

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As a rule it seems to me important that a work of art should point in more than one direction, should make ideas –visual and conceptual ones– coexist, should not be unambiguous in its meaning, and should present a conflict. It is the coexistence of these different elements which, to my mind, makes a work of art boundless¹.

Magdalena Atrias' work is complex, experimental and surprising. Her highly original form of abstraction is constructed on the intersection of the interdisciplinary and a materiality infused with both the everyday and an unconventional vocabulary. Atria became known for her plasticine (non-hardening modeling clay) installations around the year 2000. This unusual choice of material established the experimental materiality and the conceptual and symbolic associations in her work. At the beginning of her career, in the 1990s, Atria worked with the more conventional materials of paint and pigment, but with the feeling that they limited her to accept certain predetermined aspects of the artistic canon. Other aspects were also unsatisfactory: "(...) the rectangular format, the need to 'cover' a surface with pigment rather like make-up; the arbitrariness of the decision-making process at the moment of defining an image". As a result of this dissatisfaction she began to experiment with materials, discovering that plasticine allowed her to establish direct connections to the context of the material's origins, which are not bound by the Fine Arts. By this time Atria was a mother of two children and discovered in plasticine a bridge between art and the everyday, and therefore between art and life. Speaking about plasticine the artist says: "(it is) both humble and amazing: this childish material, normally used in simple children's crafts, has the unique and extraordinary property of always being soft and malleable, vulnerable to the effects of touch and temperature changes. It is also a material that embodies

¹ Personal interview with Magdalena Atria. August and September 2015. All the quotations of the artist form part of this interview unless otherwise stated.

colour in a physical as well as visual way”². Plasticine ensures the artist that the materiality of the work, charged with its own symbolic and conceptual associations, constructs its own meaning, both dissolving the limits imposed by a frame and eliminating the traditional distinction between the support and the pigment, and the division between art genres such as painting and sculpture. For Atria plasticine, by virtue of not belonging to the Fine Arts tradition, ensures that the material presence of the work is more strikingly felt. The reason why the artist chose the language of abstraction and not, for example, the figurative, as that which supposedly offers the most expressive and conceptual opportunities, is apparent in the search for meaning in the work’s materiality itself, beyond the traditional conventions of art. The artist comments: “the focus is on the world and on the possibility of discovering and revealing significant aspects of it, and the materials *of the world* are an important way in which this is made present”. What type of abstraction does Magdalena Atria propose? Contrary to the aversion predicted by Clement Greenberg in his 1939 text *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (hugely influential for the international formalist currents of abstract art in the 1950s and 1960s) to any reference to content in the work of abstract art, Atria’s abstraction is charged with associations with and direct references to reality. Today, despite the fact that since the 1980s the distinction between abstraction and representation has somehow dissolved and the dichotomy is no longer a source of conflict, there is still the sense that abstraction is “purely” abstract and that it only exists out of a desire for non-communication, out of a need to create autonomous and essential realities such as were proposed by European artists like Kasimir Malevich at the beginning of the twentieth century. The artist comments: “For me abstraction isn’t the point of departure but rather the consequence. During the process that I undertake permanently of probing into my surroundings, into visual and material situations in the world that appear intriguing or seem meaningful to me, I arrive at the abstract image as a consequence. What is interesting and mysterious to me in these types of images is the possibility of sidestepping the literality of language”. With this definition of abstraction by the artist, we are faced with the need to explore concepts that are more open than the abstract, that include the dialectic nature of abstraction

² Text by Magdalena Atria about *Cenotes*, 2013.

versus reality and/or figuration, as well as to consider how in the same way that the traditional materiality of art can limit an artist's scope and freedom of expression, literality and recognisably figurative language are also charged with preconceived and often colonised ways of perceiving the world. Perhaps abstraction, as in Atria's case, can offer us alternative ways of perceiving the world, and can for example suggest through a childish and commonplace material a profound and inspirational universe that also embraces the everyday. Writing about contemporary abstract painting Bob Nickas asks "Is it painting which is abstract, or is it life? And even if there is no recognizable subject, doesn't a painting still have a content?" Nickas goes even further and affirms that abstraction is in a way always an assisted *ready-made*, and that the meaning of abstraction as *found* will never change: "The "found" state of abstraction is its permanent, irreversible, condition"³. The strength and originality of Atria's work is located in the tension and dialogicity between the found in life and the undefined nature of abstraction. The artist is aware that abstraction is today ever harder to define, and that it isn't an independent language of universal meanings but rather a space for the unnameable in which we can give a meaning, beyond words, to certain aspects of our existence. However Atria doesn't reject references to modernist abstract art, nor to craft or design, which allow her to shift between the intimate and the monumental. On the one hand she refers to modernity as the search for an ideal and an absolute from which her art differentiates as it describes its close relation to the "existential dimension of daily life, with its haphazardness and its concrete reality". Given that her work adheres to an abstract language and therefore inevitably relates to modernism, this defines her work, in the artist's words, in "its double condition of the actual and the ideal, and shows the tension that keeps us permanently tied to one and desiring the other"⁴. The work therefore proposes itself as dialectical in a sort of metaphor of the human condition, of our struggle between the ideal and reality, between the spiritual and the material, between the body and the concept. In

³ Nickas, Bob 'The Persistence of Abstraction' in *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, Bob Nickas, Phaidon Press, London, 2009, p. 5 y 11.

⁴ Lippard, Lucy "Eccentric Abstraction", 1966, republished in Ed Maria Lind, *Abstraction: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery, London and MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2013, pp.88-97. Lippard describes artists such as Harold Paris, Frank Lincoln Viner, Claes Oldenburg, Alice Adams, Kenneth Price, and others.

1966 Lucy Lippard published the seminal text “Eccentric Abstraction” in which she describes the production of a group of artists on the east and west coasts of the US as an abstraction which takes the perversion and irreverence of Pop Art and adapts it to a non-object language in which the opposites are complimentary and not a contradiction, and therefore without dichotomy; the methods used are flexible and not fixed; there is no emotional interference, and there is a sort of perverse sensuality. Lippard writes: “Abstraction is a far more potent vehicle of the unfamiliar than figuration, and erotic sensation thrives on the unfamiliar”⁵. The eccentric abstraction described by Lippard could well be applied to Atria’s work, which is not to say that the artist’s work should be seen in the context of North American work of the 1960s, but rather that the author’s critical approach is visionary even today in articulating a series of abstract expressions that arose in the 1960s –and later–, which reflect neither abstract expressionism nor the modern abstraction that came earlier. The reference to Pop is relevant in reading Atria’s art, as well as a sort of overflowing and invasive sensuality of the physicality, colour and adaptability of her installations in plasticine and other materials.

What defines popular and mass culture in South America differs from Europe and the US. Popular culture in South America includes craftwork and references to a material culture that often has its origins in pre-Columbian, colonial or contemporary indigenous elements. The marked difference between high and low culture is not so striking in our continent –only in the concept of Fine Arts inherited from Europe–, and in Atria’s work this difference and any other form of hierarchy collapses and dualities become complementary. In South America Pop Art was more political, and in this sense one could say that the permeability of the popular in Atria’s art is inherited from Pop Art. Like Atria, other South American artists, among them Lucia Koch (Brazil), Pepe López (Venezuela) and Mariela Scafati (Argentina) work within abstraction in a symbiotic relationship with the ready-made and with popular culture. Through a close connection to popular and mass culture Atria and these and other artists manage to challenge a purist and modern understanding of abstraction, while at the same time the

⁵ Ibid Lippard, p. 97.

weight and symbolic value of the everyday becomes a constitutive aspect of the work.

The artist comments that the use of plasticine reduces the presence of personal taste, or notions of what is correct or incorrect, of what is good or bad taste, as it is a material made for a completely different purpose and is therefore free of any associations predetermined by art. Colour is also something given instead of, for example, the artist mixing her own colours: it is in this way a “found” material. Plasticine is for the artist a democratic material, as everyone has access to it from early childhood and we are all familiar with it, thereby it allows the viewer a natural access to the work while at the same time becoming surprising by the size and scale that one finds in Atria’s work.

One of the characteristics of plasticine is that it is malleable and doesn’t need complicated supports, adapting itself to the architecture; it is fragile and vulnerable but can be stuck firmly to a wall. Speaking about the work *Desde niño ya engañaba a sus amigos* (“Since Childhood he Deceived his Friends”, 2004) the artist describes the more mechanical aspects of her work process, including the actions of cutting, folding, rolling, sticking, actions which when repeated generate increasingly complex structures while embracing the unpredictable, accepting chance and accident and connecting, within the abstract nature of the work, the body and existence. This piece reveals the complexity and the different levels at which her work functions. On the one hand the systematic and mechanical aspects of the work are accompanied by the unexpected and the accidental, while on the other hand the title and the spatial context of where the work is exhibited also add their associations. The artist comments: “(...) I have a particular intention with a piece but the material also has its own ‘intentions’, there is a resistance”. So the work is intensely dialogical, given that it is constructed within the tension, confluence and dialogue between intentionality, materiality and chance. Other examples of the versatility of plasticine and the artist’s infinite resourcefulness, as well as demonstrating her explosive exploration of colour are: *El árbol no te cubre* (“The Tree Doesn’t Cover You”, 2007) round ‘carpets’ strewn with decorative patterns; *Ofrenda* (“Offering”,

2013) in which plasticine is applied onto rocks using the Venetian *millefiori* technique⁶; *Rabdomante I* (“Dowsing Rod”, 2012) in which plasticine is applied to a tree branch; *No conozco a mis vecinos* (“I Don’t Know my Neighbours”, 2003), a large circle that seems to have a pointillist style; and the monumental wall installation *Una vez, cada vez, todas las veces II* (“Once, Twice, Every Time II”, 2007) in which plasticine is applied in large-scale organic shapes.

Plasticine has a particularly powerful impact as part of site-specific installations, not only when applied to the walls of galleries and museums. One example is *Kalchakura* (2011), whose title refers to a type of lichen found on stones in the south of Chile. The plasticine shapes are directly reminiscent of the kalchakura, as is the way in which they are applied to the stone wall of the Haeinsa Temple in South Korea, creating a dialogue between the temple’s calligraphy and the colourful plasticine rosettes. *No te veré morir* (“I Won’t See You Die”, 2010) is a large-scale installation on the courtyard of the Casa Museo de Sucre in Quito. Here the artist establishes a relationship between the idea of death and the fragility of the body of General Sucre’s daughter. The plasticine evokes the vulnerability of the body, associating this with a real person and historical events, but, as the artist explains “The chromatic aspect of the work –vibrant, volatile and alive– seeks rather to avoid simple associations with the funereal, to move away from an illustrative relationship with the ideas connected to the place, to distance itself from the stereotypical”. Although the artist rejects literal interpretation, uses bright colours in abstract compositions and avoids developing a specific idea or theme, nevertheless the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of her work are inseparable, while never answering to the logic of illustrating a fact. The relationship that establishes itself in the title exists as just one more layer of meaning, while never justifying or defining the piece.

⁶ About this technique the artist comments: “The *millefiori* technique interests me precisely because, while it does have an aesthetic and decorative value, it alludes to the (unequal) exchange that occurred between Europe and the American colonies. This exchange was only possible –in the way in which it existed, as the exchange of glass beads made with the *millefiori* technique for products, metals and slaves – because of the highly attractive nature of the beads and the sensitivity the indigenous people had to their colour, their shine and the (for them mysterious) material they were made of”.

This tangential use of titles that function as references but not to explain or describe a piece, is a key part of Magdalena Atria's work. According to the artist, titles such as *Cuando no tienes a nadie, nadie puede hacerte daño*, ("When You Have Nobody, Nobody Can Hurt You"), *El ruido de mis huesos* ("The Noise of my Bones"), *Sonriendo desesperadamente* ("Smiling Desperately"), *Hace un año que no salgo de mi casa*, ("I Haven't Left my House for a Year"), *Ni contigo ni sin ti* ("Neither With You Nor Without You") are chosen intuitively, with no absolute criteria. Following her strategy of working with found elements from daily life, the only criteria of the titles is that they are found phrases, not invented by the artist. Atria comments that "All of the phrases are loaded and suggestive; they carry emotional associations, sometimes with humour, and for me they function as a sort of *atmosphere* within which the piece develops, to a certain extent determining it, but always in a very open way (just as names determine people). It never interests me that the title should narrow the spectator's experience or 'explain' the piece, but at the same time it is a space that I'm interested in activating in the work. There is no discursive correspondence between a piece of work and its title, but rather vague closeness"⁷.

This free, multidisciplinary and experimental attitude towards materials is present in many of the artist's other works in which she uses materials other than plasticine. In *A Granel* ("In Bulk", 2015), for example, she uses aluminium containers such as moulds, pots and pans within which she makes geometrical compositions using floor wax –in a palette of red, yellow, green and brown–, all of which are things that have domestic associations that contrast with the language of abstraction. In *Glifos* ("Glyphs", 2014), she uses synthetic wool to 'draw' figures on the wall as a sort of imagined alphabet. In a complex piece in the Museo Histórico Nacional de Santiago in 2013, *Investidura* ("Investiture") Atria wrapped a stone column with acrylic wool threads in a composition of yellow, brown, green and blue stripes; in *Pupa* (2013), she sewed together scraps of used clothes filled with synthetic cotton into a long organic form of rhomboid

⁷ The artist continues: "(...) They can originate from songs ('Cuando no tienes a nadie, nadie puede hacerte daño'), from a phrase read in a newspaper, ('Hace un año que no salgo de mi casa'), from a poem ('No te veré morir'), from a political slogan ('Pan, trabajo, justicia, libertad'), or from a popular song ('Ni contigo ni sin ti'). The songs need to be translated here.

shapes in warm colours that she placed within a concave object carved in stone, which intrigued the artist because as a sarcophagus it had housed a mummified body, and now, after the artist's intervention, the new body of the sculpted shape found its place here; and in *Imago* (2013) she stuffed a fragment of a heraldic shield with elastic material imitating a fake jaguar skin.

This exhibition is particularly interesting because here the artist's dialogue expands from the vocabulary of the everyday and the modern to address the material culture of the pre-Columbian era. Atria explains: "I'm just as interested in establishing a productive dialogue with both the modernist tradition and with other pre-modern contexts –such as the pre-Columbian, or the natural world– in which I find the possibility of questioning the categories of the abstract and the figurative, and of accessing spaces of intersection and/or conflict between categories of existence such as the ideal and the real, the spiritual and the material, body and concept". This most recent exploration of the artist in areas such as the natural world or the pre-Columbian era is consistent with Atria's expansive investigation into the language of abstraction, removing it from its historical insularity and its canonical origins in order to propose it as a language of the contemporary that enters into dialogue with the everyday, the popular, and also with the pre-modern origins of our South American continent.

Design, industrial processes and advertising are other important references for Atria. For the piece *Cazar y Recolectar* ("Hunting and Gathering", 2009) and also *Ahora todo es peor* ("Now Everything is Worse", 2008), she uses flocking, a technique which, as the artist explains "is often used to give a velvety finish to toys and handcrafts and is associated with low-cost objects; it interests me because of the tension that the technique establishes with the context and the purposes of art". *Ahora todo es peor* is made with 300 CDs on which a graphic image has been stamped with flocking, where recognisable symbols from contexts as diverse as political parties or company logos, products and car brands are mixed with invented abstract designs inspired by the circular shape of the CD.

According to the artist the technique of flocking immediately appeals to touch and physicality, and not only to sight, in a way that is similar to the effect of plasticine. Colour takes on a particular physical quality creating a special tension with the surface of the disks and the corporate aspect of the logos. Atria uses this circular shape in order to create an equivalence between the symbols of political, religious and social associations, logos of various companies and commercial products as well as others that are not determined and are more abstract. In this exercise of the creation of a sort of abstract pan-language using both symbols and images that are not symbols, the artist intends to establish a “link between the language of pictorial abstraction with modernist roots and certain images and symbols that inhabit the collective imaginary, embodying meanings that range from the ideological to the commercial”. It is interesting how here the idea of modernism is linked to the commercial and the ideological aspects of contemporaneity, given that the historical canon of Latin American modern art does not get mixed with ideological and commercial proselytism; indeed the period has instead been idealised as removed from these realities despite the known fact that the golden age of Latin American modernism took place, in almost every case, under dictatorships. However Atria does not establish an idealised association with modernity, instead recognising its contradictions and ambiguities in relation to its social and political context. The artist states that: “It cannot be ignored that the supposedly pure and uncontaminated language of the abstract form has been absorbed by advertising and design as a tool of visual communication; this adds levels of complexity to the relationships between abstraction, modernism and social context. Which is partly why a purely formal investigation of abstract language wouldn’t make much sense to me”.

Recently the artist has developed a new series, called *Meteoritos* (2014). These are sculptural pieces which evoke the form of natural stones, made of ceramic and glaze, sometimes including materials such as plaster, plasticine and acrylic fibers. The *Meteoritos* are works that can be read both as abstract or as figurative, they are constructed as a sort of imperfect, accidented geometry or abstraction, they stand at the intersection between life and abstraction, the existential and the determined, between art and nature. Using an ancient

technique the artist aims to create objects that do not seem to be manmade, while at the same time she does not intend to represent objects, in this case stones, that exist in nature. The artist states: "(...) In a similar way to plasticine – by letting the material generate shapes that do not clearly communicate their origins–, these pieces in some way break down the distinction between the abstract and the figurative, the natural and the artificial, as they can be either or neither of these things. Finally, the “magical” character of a meteorite –an object that comes from unimaginable places– relates to the “magical” quality of art that takes us to *other* mental, sensorial and emotional places”. In this interstitial, expansive and dialogical space between art and nature, between the abstract and the figurative, the symbolical and the conceptual, Atria has developed, since the end of the 1990s, her unpredictable and idiosyncratic creative versatility.

Magdalena Atria’s work offers us a language that communicates a lot without telling us what to think. It gives us the opportunity to experiment with our body and our imagination the sensuality and evocative capacity of art. The dialogue and tension intrinsic to Atria’s art, as much in its materiality as in its symbolical and conceptual aspects, translates into a dialogue on life in which contradictions are experienced in a complex, vital and dynamic way. As this text has explored, her form of abstraction is immersed in the everyday as well as in multiple aspects of culture and nature. It is in the intersection between life and art, revealed in abstraction, that we live the transformative and unique visual and symbolical experience of Atria’s work.