TONG

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I want to write about three very particular projects – each unique both for their nature and the context of their exhibition– in which I was involved as curator of Magdalena Atria's work. The three projects were similar in the challenges that they posed, but were very different in their content. Beyond the evident similarity of the materials used, if there was one element which united these works it was that they were all realised under the *tong* sign, as I will explain below.

I

In 2009 I curated the exhibition *El patio de mi casa. Arte contemporáneo en 16 patios de Córdoba* ("The courtyard of my house. Contemporary Art in 16 Courtyards in Córdoba"), a project involving the private courtyards of popular houses typical to that Andalusian city which are characterised by an exuberant decor of flowers, plants, antiques, architectural remains and other elements; and the monumental courtyards of old houses and palaces that now house public institutions. Sixteen artists from various countries were invited to participate, each intervening in one courtyard. The exhibition, a curatorial adventure that was the first of its kind, engaged both with the complexity of projects intervening in outside spaces –outside of the security of the "white cube"–, as well as intruding into private areas in which the art co-existed with the inhabitants, either in the private homes or in the places of work,

as these courtyards continue to "live" and carry out their usual functions.

On the other hand the Cordoban courtyards are, because of their architectural and spatial profiles, unique and complex spaces with a character in which the interior and exterior, the public and the private overlap. They also have very particular traditional characteristics such as their baroque aesthetic and *horror vacui* ("the fear of empty space") which results in a profusion of vibrant and colourful ornamentation. When I invited the artists to participate in the project and showed them images, many were astonished at the overwhelming nature of the courtyards and even exclaimed: "There's no room for anything else here!"

The project avoided using the courtyards as mere showcases for the art, and none were specifically modified for the occasion. Instead the project proposed a dialogue between the art and the spaces, in which the site took on an active role. The resultant works were ephemeral *situations*[1] born out of the interaction between the courtyards and the artistic interventions. More than *site-specific* works, in the most successful pieces significant conjunctions were formed in which the art and the context worked together to contribute to aesthetic, symbolic and conceptual experiences that resulted from the interaction between the courtyard and the artistic intervention that the former both incorporated and shaped, developing into a final synthesis. For the

[1] I use the term with a different meaning to the denomination of the Situationist movement, although related to it.

artists it was an exercise in dialogue (in the Bakhtinian sense) with the space as protagonist, in which the relationship between the traditional and the contemporary was explored, and which took up the challenge of communicating with a general public without diminishing the artistic interest and complexity of the works. Furthermore, some of the works were in private homes, whose owners lived with the art, opening their houses at specific times to allow the public access.

One of the keys to curating an exhibition as unique and complex as *El patio de mi casa* was to select artists capable of responding adequately to the difficult commission. For the most part I chose artists whose previous work allowed a certain confidence that they would be able to rise the challenge, artists such as Cai Guo Qiang or Jorge Perianes, whose work is open, inventive and responsive to spatial context, which suggested a possible dialogue with the courtyards. I also used works that were already finished, such as the installation *Jardín colgante* ("Hanging Garden") by Mona Hatoum, which seemed to me would function well, albeit differently, in a new context. In the selection of other works I took risks, trusting my instinct.

Inviting Magdalena Atria to participate was a big risk. At the time she was known primarily for her impressive abstract paintings using plasticine, presented in a traditional way hung on gallery and museum walls. At first sight a painter –even one using an unusual material– would not appear to be a

suitable artist for a project like this one of the courtyards. However, I'd noticed that her paintings take on different formats from those typical of traditional painting, and sometimes even take on irregular or elaborate forms. I particularly remembered the piece *Desde niño ya engañaba a sus amigos* ("Even as a Child he would Cheat his Friends", 2004), in which the plasticine paint extended in circles downwards on the wall to the floor. I sensed in her work the energy –and more importantly, the potential– to flow over into the space. The artist also had some three-dimensional pieces, such as *Sonriendo desesperadamente* ("Smiling Desperately"), a hanging irregular-shaped sphere armed with toothpicks and modelling clay (also from 2004) which already indicated Atria's leaning towards the element of craftsmanship in her work. In addition, the plasticity of the material she was using for her paintings almost obliged her to expand beyond an art that it strictly speaking painting, something that was already very present in her *oeuvre* despite the pieces still being limited to the white cube. Plasticine also has the advantage of being able to be stuck to surfaces without damaging them, as well as being relatively weather-resistant.

I felt that Atria's work was clamouring to get out, to escape, and I didn't hesitate in inviting her to take part in *El patio de mi casa*. I was also struck by how the colourful nature of her work and the elements of baroque geometry present in it would coordinate with the courtyard's exhilarant floral and ornamental decor. She was brave enough to take on the challenge

and to launch herself into an exterior piece on a monumental scale that she had never undertaken before; an enterprise that opened up a new direction in her work. The challenge was made even greater by the fact that I offered her one of the most beautiful and impressive courtyards: an old townhouse transformed into a complex of small studios used by local craftsmen. The space in this emblematic Cordoban courtyard, at number 50 San Basilio Street, is more complicated than other more orthogonal courtyards, and it includes a staircase at its centre. The space is heavily ornamented and used very regularly. However I was aware that these difficulties could in fact work in the artist's favour, inciting her to develop a new line of work, stimulating her dialogue with the surroundings.

The result was dazzling. Atria used hexagonal-shaped modules of plasticine in various colours and sizes, with an array of images on them, in order to construct a sort of flexible, colourful mosaic that spread over a large part of the courtyard. The modules referenced the Andalusian tiles with the geometrical Arab-inspired designs that are common in Cordoba, but in her case they became kaleidoscopes conveying psychedelic evocations. The piece gave the impression of having always been in the courtyard, and of having been made there centuries ago, despite its contemporary visual nature. It flowed over the walls without imposing itself on the elements that were already there, integrating itself without imposing itself as a "work of art" and therefore superior to a plant or a water tap. The work

slid under a grille, was a base for flower pots, melted over the glass of windows, flowed into a public bathroom, crawled across the floor, and submerged itself in an old well, as the plasticine followed the features of the space and adapted to its shapes and colours, its malleability and softness embracing all the haphazard irregularities of the courtyard. The piece coexisted and dialogued with the courtyard, with its many parts, spaces and timeframes. At the same time it maintained a sufficiently distinctive character to surprise and defy expectations of what one normally finds in a Cordoban courtyard, thereby introducing the aesthetic shock disassociating itself from established experience that Jacques Rancière[2] discusses. With a title inspired by a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, *El espejo de tinta* ("The Ink Mirror") Atria's piece was the most beautiful in the project and also perhaps the work that most entered into dialogue with its context.

II

Only a year later I fortunate enough to be able to curate *Arte contemporáneo y patios de Quito* ("Contemporary Art and the Courtyards of Quito"), a similar exhibition in the extraordinary historical centre of the capital of Ecuador, the first city centre to be declared a UNESCO Heritage Site. Different from Cordoba, there is no established tradition in Quito of the exuberantly decorated small private courtyards in houses. So in Quito the decision was taken to use

[2] Jacques Rancière: "Las paradojas del arte político", *Criterios*, no.36, La Habana, 2009, p.73.

mainly large public courtyards for the exhibition, focusing the attention on their historical, cultural and heritage value. The size and scale of many of the courtyards is characteristic of the impressive baroque colonial architecture typical of Quito, where there is a preponderance of religious buildings. The courtyards are, for want of a better word, more "neutral" than in Cordoba: in general they stand out more for their intrinsic characteristics than for their decoration.

Given Atria's success in the Cordoban courtyard, I didn't hesitate to ask her to take part in this exhibition. And this time aroun working with her was not a risk but a sure bet. However, the challenge was greater and of a different nature. I asked her to work in nothing less than the courtyard of the Museo Casa de Sucre ("The Museum of the House of Sucre"), an eighteenth century mansion in which the mythical Venezuelan General Antonio José de Sucre, one of the most brilliant military strategists, a hero of the Latin American independence who definitively defeated the Spanish at the Battle of Ayacucho in 1824, lived. The museum belongs to and is administered by the Ecuadorean Ministry of Defence, which makes it all the more surprising –given the clichéd bad relationship between contemporary art and the military– that permission was given to hold the exhibition in this space so charged with historical and symbolic implications. The museum-house is in a building bought by Sucre in 1828 when he married Mariana Carcelén, the Marquesa de Solanda, a *criolla* from a wealthy Quito family, who was the love of his life. Because of his active involvement in the efforts to

limit the chaos that overwhelmed South America after independence, the General only actually lived in the house for a few years until his assassination during an ambush in Colombia in 1830 at the age of 35. He left one daughter, Teresa, who was born in 1829, and whom he barely knew. To complete the tragedy, in 1831, when the girl was only two years old she fell to her death from the arms of her stepfather General Isidro Barriga, with whom Sucre's widow had married, into the courtyard two floors down, thereby leaving Sucre without descendants.

Taking as a starting point this domestic tragedy as opposed to looking for inspiration in the epic military story of the General, Atria captured the spirit of the place: the house is a site of heritage and historical interest not because of any public event that took place there, but rather because it was Sucre's domestic "nest" where he wanted to retire to a family life with the woman he loved, to have children and eventually to die in peace at the heart of a city that he also loved. The house is a personal context, not a site of "Historical" (with a capital "H") interest; it is lyrical, not heroic. It is imbued with a private tragedy: the tragic personal and domestic destiny of a great triumphing hero; his terrible defeat. While in Cordoba the artist had incorporated her work into the aesthetic and feeling of the courtyard, transforming it through her formally abstract work, in the Museo Casa de Sucre she created *No te vere morir* ("I Won't See you Die"), a narrative piece, although it also employs a non-figurative language, whose title is inspired by the poetry of Idea Vilariño.

Atria installed a large plasticine stain onto the courtyard, from the second floor down to the ground floor, representing the little girl's fall. As it is unclear exactly where the tragedy took place the artist situated the work centre stage on the facade of the courtyard. The stain was multi-coloured and vibrant, not in the last bit funereal, but, as though narrating the death indirectly, the colours used were warm at the top and became successively colder further down the piece. In this way the work described the physical trajectory of the girl's falling body, and the shift from life to death, only through colour, abstract forms and the symbolism of plasticine as the "living", malleable material that is both soft and perishable. In this way the artist strengthened the semiotic assets of abstract painting (synesthesia of colour and the resultant symbolism, the indication of movement, emotional impulse...) to represent the girl's fall and death. Atria plays on the ability of abstract language to denote meaning and create emotion indirectly, without representation, through an evocation of feeling: the distorted and highly subjectivised open semiosis of the abstract sign communicates feeling through the senses and provokes emotions, just as music does. The installed painting created by Atria traces the path of the fatal plunge with a multi-coloured bloodstain, at the same time embracing the architecture, respecting its particularities and thereby creating a unique impact. The resulting strong impression is reinforced by the fact that the piece of art is placed *in situ* –or approximately– where the tragedy took place as

though it covers or drapes the trajectory of the real event while at the same time representing it in a non-realistic fashion.

III

The next project again raised the bar. A new opportunity presented itself one year later in a surprising, far-away and unusual place that is sacred in every sense of the word: The Haein Buddhist Temple, tucked away in the Gaya mountains of South Korea. Established in the year 802 and renovated on various occasions –the last time in 1644– the temple is a complex of buildings, open areas and *stupas* (reliquaries) harmoniously placed within a beautiful mountain setting. Considered as one of the main temples of the Chogye order, there are 350 ordained monks living there keeping alive the practice of traditional Korean Zen Buddhism, and it is a site of pilgrimage both for Buddhists and for lay people interested in the cultural treasure that it houses. The most important of these is without a doubt the Korean Tripitaka, the oldest and most complete collection of writings from the Buddhist canon, engraved onto 81,258 wooden blocks between 1237 and 1248. These engravings were completed to replace the originals, themselves finished in 1011, but which had been burned in 1232 during the Mongol invasion. Along with the buildings constructed at the back of the temple complex in the fifteenth century, where the engravings have been preserved with great success using only natural methods, the whole area has been declared a UNESCO world heritage site.

As part of a festival organised in 2011 to celebrate the millennial of the first Tripitaka, Sun Gak the abbot of the monastery, decided to launch the Haein Temple Art Project, a sort of mini-biennale of contemporary art at this remote location, as part of his vision of giving the temple better visibility as a religious and touristic attraction, thereby countering the reclusive nature of traditional Korean Buddhism that has increasingly affected the impact of Buddhism on Korean society. My role in this project, curated by Yu Yeon Kim and Jiwoong Yoon, was that of a consultant, and the emphasis was on establishing a dialogue between contemporary art and the temple, with its religious, historical, cultural and aesthetic contents. The project was called *Tong*, a Korean and Chinese character which could be translated as "bond", but which also means "voyage", "openness" or "moving across a space". The title's meaning is self-evident given the nature of the project, which succeeded in creating unexpected links between the field of contemporary art and an ancient Buddhist temple. *Tong*, therefore, as in the union and articulation of different elements, and as in transversality.

I wanted Atria to work within the space of the temple itself, as she had done with the previous exhibitions. Despite his liberal attitude, it wasn't easy to convince the abbot to let the artist intervene in this way in the sacred space, full of religious signification and where strict rituals take place. However in the end the abbot allowed Atria to work on the stone

platform on which the temple's main entrance rests, called the Il Ju Mun ("One Pillar Gate"). On the low walls at either side of the steps, the artist created *Kalchakura*, a piece composed of a series of overlapping circles made of plasticine with multi-coloured geometrical and organic patterns. She was the only one of the over thirty artists invited to be allowed to intervene directly within the confines of the sacred grounds.

Given where her work was placed, the first impression upon seeing the circles –from a distance as one approaches Il Ju Mun– was to associate them with the *mandalas* (ritual symbols) that greet the visitors to the temple, and this was, in fact, one of the non-figurative references of the work. But there is so much more. *Kalchakura* is among Atria's oeuvre the work that has perhaps the most conceptual content; her art has an abstract language that always articulates elaborate feelings that are developed beyond the visual and the aesthetic, as is suggested by the literary titles of her pieces. While her work can appear to be merely decorative, this is in fact far from the case. As Harold Rosenberg so eloquently put it, all contemporary art is like a centaur: half artistic material, and half words. And the latter provides the dynamic element of the work, through which its artistic nature and message are determined[3]. From the very beginning of what we today call visual arts, the eye has never been enough to entirely take in the profound meaning of a piece of artwork, and today's

[3] Harold Rosenberg: "Art and Words" in *The Definition of Art*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

art has taken to an extreme the conceptual content of the scopic.

Kalchakura is the name of a lichen found in the south of Chile (very far south) that is harvested for medicinal purposes. The name means “stone flower” in Mapadungun, the language of the indigenous people, the Mapuche, who had already populated Chile by the time the construction of the Haein temple began. Lichen grows over rocks, and symbolically Atria planted these Mapuche “stone flowers” onto the low walls of the ancient platform of the Buddhist temple, as though transporting them to the temple on the other side of the Pacific, from the extreme south to the north. Thereby she established an extreme and lyrical *tong*. The lichen themselves are *tong*: organisms made up of the symbiosis between an algae and a fungus in an efficient union that allows it to survive in extreme climates. As the artist herself said, *Kalchakura* is “an attempt to create this sort of symbiosis, bringing together things that belong to different worlds and interconnecting them in different ways”[4]. She goes on to say that “the bright and artificial colours of the plasticine create a tension between the natural and artificial, the old and the new, the organic and the synthetic, the sacred and the profane”[5]. These are tensions that are in dialogue, creators of meaning in the spark of contact. Formally, the circles and their arrangement in the installation refer to the lichen, while their internal patterns are inspired both by the *mandalas* and the imaginary of

[4] Magdalena Atria : *About Kalchakura*, 2011, Digital document about the project.
[5] Idem.

psychedelia and pop cultures. These symbiotic connections extend from Chile to Korea, from north to south, from Buddhism to the religion of the Mapuche, from the architecture that has religious and heritage value, to the playful material meant for children that is plasticine, from the symmetry of its designs to the unexpectedness of adapting itself to the inconsistencies of the architecture where they have been "planted"... *Tong*.

Beyond this, *Kalchakura* moved me because of the artist's ingenuous gesture of transplanting a very simple element far from its place of origin in a Buddhist temple situated in remote vegetation. A transplant imbued with the cultural effort of establishing diverse connections, as though surreptitiously stamping the Chilean flag on the very entrance of the appropriated foreign location. Oh that every expression of nationalism were as gentle and poetic!