



“Salón (inter) Nacional de Artistas”, Medellín, 2013, installation view

## MEDELLIN MEDITATIONS

### Mark Nash on 43 Salón (inter) Nacional de Artistas, Medellín

*“Part of the exhibition deals with SABER [To Know], the compass for survival that recognizes the importance and actuality of ancestral and innate forms of knowledge, of specific traditions and ways of understanding developed in a particular territory. The other part, recognizes a parallel force, a DESCONOCER [To Not Know] that accepts the suspension of univocal meanings, that launches us into doubt, ambiguity and uncertainty.”*

Every year, Colombia stages a national exhibition of contemporary art. Different cities compete to host this important event, and in 2012 Medellín was selected with a curatorial project developed by Mariángela Méndez, “Saber Desconocer” (To Know Not to Know). The venue was significant – an important textile-producing town, Medellín until recently was plagued with drug-related violence. In the past decade the city has resurrected itself, having been declared one of the world’s most innovative cities by the Urban Land Institute.<sup>2</sup>

Méndez’s exhibition takes us to the heart of current dilemmas of curatorial and exhibition ethics and aesthetics. The curatorial proposition –

that art is about knowing and not knowing at the same time – is a very elegant articulation of the phenomenology of the large international exhibition. On the one hand it shows works concerned with conveying information and articulating knowledge – for example Abel Rodríguez’s “Ciclo anual del bosque de la Vega” (2005), which presents this indigenous artists’ knowledge of the Amazon rainforest through detailed watercolors of Amazon vegetation. On the other hand are works such as Karin Sander’s “Mailed Paintings”, which are primarily concerned with more traditional aesthetic contemplation, even though their white surfaces are marked by their passage through various postal systems, which shifts them from the not knowing of the immersive white canvas to the knowing of the markings that trace their shipping history.

Méndez worked with a curatorial team whose projects were presented across the exhibition’s four main venues – The Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín (MAMM), a reconditioned factory, and three venues in the city center: The Regional Museum of Antioquia (formerly the town hall), the Casa del Encuentro (the former museum) across the street, and the Antioquia Building



Ernesto Neto, "La nave madre monte", 2013, installation view

across the main square (currently being refurbished for the University of Antioquia). At the MAMM there was an elegant opposition between the exhibitions in the two side galleries – one called “Estado Oculto” curated by Rodrigo Moura, which confronts the viewer with a complex engagement with indigeneity. I was particularly taken by the two video works documenting an initiation ceremony for young men in Vila Nova, located in the Minas Gerais state in Brazil – Isael Maxakali’s “Tatakox” (2007) and the collectively authored “Tatakox Vila Nova” (2009), produced by a neighboring village that felt Maxakali’s initial representation of the ceremony incomplete.<sup>3</sup> These works are both all too rare examples of the empowerment of indigenous peoples through artistic production. These and other works by indigenous artists set up a tension between the “authentically” indigenous; works by contemporary Western artists interested in similar issues, e.g. Lothar Baumgarten’s “Unsettled Objects”, a slide projection piece from 1968–1969; and different kinds of reconstructions and representations (for example the nineteenth century imitation of pre-Colombian ceramics produced by Don Julian Alzate and his sons, or the drawings of such arti-

facts by José Antonio Suárez Londoño). “Estado Oculto” seems on the side of not knowing – experiences we as Western subjects do not and cannot access – but it also enables us to acquire a kind of knowledge about indigenous peoples and their artistic production.

Curated by Florencia Malbrán, “Destiempo” – the other exhibition at MAMM – presents artists working in a way that is more familiar to the European visitor acquainted with Arte Povera or minimalist and conceptual work. The “Destiempo” show can appear to present a familiar world which is then also illuminated by the context of the opposition. The works seem more fragile, more culturally located, less universal than if this were a stand-alone exhibition, for example. The sand of Giovanni Anselmo’s “Il sentiero verso oltremare” (1992–2013) tracing an oblong shape on the gallery floor echoing the earth of, say, “Tatakox Vila Nova”, where the community digs out the souls of the young men whose rite of passage is being celebrated. Or the concrete and conceptual poetry of Jorge Méndez Blake inscribed in bright red letters on the wall of the “Destiempo” show, corresponding with Johanna Calle’s mechanically produced drawings

of indigenous words displayed on old account ledgers in “Estado Occulto”.

Between the two exhibitions, the installation of one of Ernesto Neto’s “Naves” wonderfully facilitates that conversation. It is a self-contained space where you can pause between the two shows. The transparency and tactility of the piece both connects and separates the viewer from the surrounding displays.

The overall exhibition “Saber Desconocer” also had a feature key to critical exhibition-making – it presented its own making (and by implication a viewer’s visit) as a self-reflexive process. These days, when so many artists and curators refer to criticality and reflexivity, it is important to distinguish those who really do this well. The show did this for example through the various reflections on time across its parts: In “Des-tiempo”, the frozen time of the old clock from the Sabana Railway station in Bogotá stopped at 8:05 before the dismantling of the Colombian railway system, and now hangs on the exhibition wall. Or François Bucher’s installation “The Duration of the Present (notes on frequency)” on the second floor of the Museo de Antioquia, which includes time-lapse photography and works reflecting on contemporary political and sidereal time. Both phenomenologically point the exhibition visitor to the time of their viewing – the time they spend in the present of the exhibition and their location in Medellín, Colombia, in 2013.

Postcolonial and cultural studies too often neglect the precolonial genocides in the Americas and elsewhere, and artists who are from indigenous backgrounds today find entry into the international exhibition world surprisingly difficult. It is only five years since the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Very few curators of international exhibitions include indigenous work. At least a quarter of the 110 works shown in “Saber Desconocer” were by indigenous artists or dealt with indigenous issues. Compared with the three such works in *DOCUMENTA(13)*, we get sense of the international art world’s disinterest in this area.

In the words of Indian art critic Geeta Kapur, this exhibition is an exemplary instance of agonistic curating: “I favor looking at an exhibition as an expositional argument, staged by the curator within a supporting *mise-en-scène*; as a curatorially determined itinerary that unfolds within the synchronous structure of the installed exhibition, setting it apace into the temporal dimension.”<sup>4</sup> “Saber Desconocer” clearly articulates an argument, not just between knowing and not knowing, as a key psychoanalytic dynamic of aesthetic experience, but one concerned with inclusion and exclusion – inclusion of indigenous artists normally excluded or marginalized in international exhibitions.

43 Salón (inter) Nacional de Artistas, “Saber Desconocer”, Medellín, Colombia, September 6–November 3, 2013.

#### Notes

- 1 Mariángela Méndez, “To Know and to Not Know in One Salon”, in: *Guía a lo, Desconocido Bogota*: Ministerio de Cultura 2013, pp. 256–257.
- 2 An international environmental NGO with a focus on land use.
- 3 Incomplete because it did not show the unearthing of the children’s spirits, which the villagers of Vila Nova considered essential.
- 4 Geeta Kapur, “Curating Across Agonistic Worlds”, in: Mukherji, Ahua and Singh (eds.), *InFlux. Contemporary Art in Asia*, London 2013.