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NEWS



Detail of A Bit of Sky

PUBLISHED ON MAGAZINE

Solo Show

Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck

Issue #69 Jun - Aug 2008

Robin Andéle  
Greeley

How does one approach a work of art that only declares itself as such at the very point at which it conceptually unravels? How might such an unraveling strategically—even coercively—prompt insight into the continuing repercussions of modernism’s contradictory project? These were two fundamental questions set by Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck’s fascinating *pedacito de cielo* (1998–2008), shown at Harvard University’s Sert Gallery. At first glance, Balteo’s piece presented itself not as a single, authored work of art at all, but as an “intimate museum” that brought together pieces from Venezuela’s much-touted geometric abstraction. Operating simultaneously as artist and curator, Balteo grouped individual pieces in order to imitate a didactic museum exhibition exploring Caracas’s leap from rustic backwater to internationally acclaimed metropolis. Works by canonical artists were juxtaposed—“entangled” is Balteo’s term—with other works, documents, and photographs to interrogate the standard narrative of social and architectural progress surrounding the country’s effort at rapid modernization during the 1950s. Materials from Gego, Alejandro Otero, Eugenio Espinoza, Alvaro Sotillo, Miguel Arroyo, Gerd Leufert, Antonieta Sosa, Rolando Peña, and Claudio Perna functioned as varied, often contradictory responses to three seminal architectural projects from the mid-1950s: Carlos Raúl Villanueva’s School of Architecture and Urbanism (1956); the Unidad Residencial El Paraíso, designed by Villanueva and Carlos Celis; and the Torre Polar (1952–54) by José Miguel Galia and Martín Vegas. Only in the last room, on the end wall, did the viewer see an original piece produced by Balteo himself: two small, luminous mosaic maps of Caracas, fabricated with detritus from an Otero glass polychrome, unexplained and placed on either side of a magisterial Otero *Colorritmo*. The *Colorritmo* itself hung atop a photo-diptych of Otero’s crumbling façades for the School of Architecture and Urbanism; the whole wall ensemble emphasized the continuing reverberations of Venezuela’s ruined utopian project. This Balteo/Otero “entanglement” provided a subtle key to the entire concept of *pedacito de cielo*: the “work of art” consisted solely of a multi-layered set of maneuvers that functioned as both critique and meta-critique. On a basic level, it questioned positivist narratives of Venezuela’s spectacular modernization by revealing the social and aesthetic tensions underlying that rhetoric of progress. But it also willfully yet secretly enforced an interrogation of the procedures by which we judge artworks. Was it a single work of art or merely a curated collection of other artists’ works? Paradoxically, it was through this distrust of its own conditions that *pedacito de cielo* revealed itself as a work of art. *Pedacito de cielo* began with an entry hall displaying the state-sponsored architectural projects of Villanueva et al. Only in the next room did one begin to perceive the deliberate irony: architecture that intended to take art out of the museum and into the streets had been forcibly confined in the museum. Abstract works by Sosa (*Relief From Chaotic Forms*), Mérida, and others were juxtaposed with photos of Arroyo teaching (in the School of Architecture’s already debilitated buildings) and other didactic materials, suggesting varieties of unfolding, collapsing, appropriation, and disintegration. Various odd placements wrenched the viewer’s attention this way and that: a catalogue of Espinoza’s exhibition at the Caracas Museo de Bellas Artes had been dismembered and hung absurdly high overhead, pinioned to a Corbusier pillar of the Sert Gallery. Sotillo’s graphics for a symposium on “rationalization in construction” were wrapped around the edge of a skewed dividing wall. The weighty, materialist farce of Espinoza’s coconut-filled grid impeded one’s access to Gego’s featherweight *Reticulárea*. Sotillo’s Plan Caracas was displayed at a strange angle to the wall, underscoring the tension between the off-kilter space of the Sert Gallery and Corbusier’s grid for the Carpenter Center that houses it. Rationalism began to self-destruct from within. The next room revealed more entanglements: Perna photographically appropriated Gego’s *Reticuláreas*, while Gego herself entangled drawing with sculpture further down the wall. In between, Otero’s Solar Needle was thrust against Rolando Peña’s *The Oil Project*, hinting strongly at the risks of putting one’s faith in an oil economy, whether the “oil nationalism” of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship or today’s “oil socialism” of Hugo Chávez. Propelled by oil, wrote José Ignacio Cabrujas, the “Venezuelan Dream” has only ever been a “hallucination.” But where was Balteo’s personal vision in all of this? The more he disguised his own perspective behind the works of others, the more one was taunted to sift through those distractions to find it. In this regard, perhaps the most subtle but most telling aspect of *pedacito de cielo* was Balteo’s partial inclusion of Duchamp’s

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Door at the juncture between rooms. pedacito de cielo, in fact, "entangled" Duchamp, Corbusier, and Caracas. Corbusier's functionalist vision, so poignantly expressed via both the Carpenter Center and Caracas's state-sponsored architectural utopianism, in the end was no match for Duchamp's withering critique of modernity. And Balteo knew it.

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