

## DACS Exhibition

Raul Ortega Ayala:

*Extra-Extra*

16 June – 31 July 2010

Gilane Tawadros (GT): The starting point for many of your works is the research you carry out as a participant observer of ordinary, everyday activities such as gardening, cooking and office work. Why have you chosen to investigate the banal and the everyday as the focus of your artistic practice?

Raul Ortega Ayala (ROA): I don't think it was a conscious choice per se. When I left art school after my undergraduate degree and had to go back to 'real life' and find a job in a place like Mexico City where there isn't really much to offer for recently graduated artists, I ended up, like many, in a job in an office that wasn't quite linked with what I had studied. And once there I began to wonder how I could link my 'subsisting life' with my artistic practice. During this period I started learning about many artists (writers, painters, composers) who had two lives that somehow never merged. And in jobs like these you also end up meeting people who do that: lead two different lives. So how can one bridge the two? Thus I started shifting slowly my perception from passive bystander to participant observer and with time this became my focus and my working method.

GT: One of the works in your series entitled 'Bureaucratic Sonata', which is based on your research into office work, is a small work on paper that seems to bridge these two worlds of being an artist and having to subsist. Using an old typewriter, you have written out the story of the woman who invented 'liquid paper' on a sheet of A4 paper, using the product every time you make a mistake. Bette Nesmith Graham, the inventor of liquid paper, had intended to be an artist but ended up working as a secretary. Drawing on her experience of artists painting over their mistakes on canvas, she invented liquid paper as a way to correct her own typing errors, ultimately creating a multi-million dollar business. This work, and others in the series, seems to suggest that the work of being an artist is about transforming ordinary life into something that is extraordinary?

ROA: Whilst doing research on the history of offices I started looking into the people who had invented the tools used in everyday bureaucratic tasks (typewriters, pencils, erasers, etc.) and came across the story of Bette Nesmith Graham. I found it quite compelling as it was doing the opposite of what I was trying to do in the beginning: bring these materials into the 'art realm', and she had taken her experience from the 'art realm' and applied it to the office world. This made me realise that I should consider the possibility of working both ways: taking the ordinary into the extra-ordinary and the extra-ordinary to the ordinary. And I think this piece, and one I made in the gardening series where I turned a tree into paper, charcoal and wood and then used these elements to make a drawing of that same tree, represents this cycle.

GT: In the process of transforming the ordinary into the extra-ordinary and vice versa, a great deal of effort and physical labour is expended: in the case of *Calf Roping* for example, where you 'restrain' an office chair with rubber bands or the envelope which you have created by shredding an envelope and letter and then meticulously weaving them together to create a new envelope. This contradicts many people's perception of contemporary art as an endeavour which is cerebral and mental rather than physical and labour intensive. Is this intentional on your part?

ROA: I think of my work as conceptual but inextricably linked to an experience. Every *métier* I've been immersed in has had a specific corporeal manifestation that I bring into each series. For example, in the case of 'Bureaucratic Sonata', labour-intensive (and somehow non-sensical) activities were proper to the environment, therefore something I thought worth exploring in

The series, in the gardening series: grafting, cutting, ordering; in the food series: cooking, socialising and so on

GT: The series on gardening is called 'An Ethnography of Gardening' and you have described your role in these various fields as that of a 'participant observer', observing, researching and collecting materials on your chosen subject which then provide the basis for a series of works that you call 'souvenirs' which accompany 'field-notes'. In this way, the role of the artist has become that of a detective-cum-tourist investigating the world of gardening or food or office work as though it were a foreign terrain. Does this enforced distance from your subject matter make it possible for you to see the world in new ways and to invent new creations like the imaginary flower you fabricated called Vermillion Spinnaker?

ROA: I trained as a painter in art school and with time realised that what I'd learnt was a sort of methodology which I would carry everywhere and use as my a priori 'filter' to relate to the world: I'm a painter, therefore I relate creatively to the world through painting. I wasn't at all comfortable with this restrictive approach so when I started

working as a participant observer I stopped entering a 'world' with this preconceived gaze and decided to go into it with as little redetermination as possible. Unlike scientific disciplines, where lengthy processes with strict methods are needed, artists have the possibility to change methods and techniques as they please since they are not in the business of proving anything with scientific rigour. So this freedom has allowed me to see and relate to the world creatively in new ways.

GT: I'm very interested in the distinction that you draw between research carried out within a scientific context and research as an activity undertaken by artists which does not obey the same rules. There has been a great deal of debate here in the UK about what constitutes 'research', especially where this applies to work carried out by artists. Academic institutions have struggled to adapt their concepts of research (based upon scientific methods) to artists' research activity. The main problem seems to be that whereas scientists start the research process with a particular question which the research is intended to answer, artists may not have a clear question at the beginning of the process and frequently may not find any solutions but, in fact, come up with more unanswered questions at the end of their research. Has this been your experience?

ROA: Absolutely. I never know what the outcome of a series is going to be or how I will react to a particular context or which materials I'll end up using. The premise is the only thing that is clear: *I will immerse myself in a particular milieu, train as I go in its specific métier and work with whatever material I come across which is distinct to that context.* And also unlike scientists I'm not trained in any of the fields I'm immersing myself in, until I'm taking part in it. And in that sense my practice and my research are circumstantial but I like this uncertainty, and I like the fact that there will be more questions than answers resulting from it, because, since we are not in the business of proving anything, we can work with most knowledge, which is transitory and is constantly in flux. And by constantly changing my methods and the context and continuously learning new métiers, I end up questioning my own craftsmanship.

GT: There is a self-reflexive, even self-critical, aspect to your practice which makes you question the validity of your own research and also your role as an artist. This emerges in a witty and humorous way in your ongoing project called 'Extra-Extra' where you have taken on roles as an extra in films, soap operas, shows, advertisements and so on as if your existence as an artist was completely contingent on other people and the contexts which they create and into which you insert yourself. Do you see your position as an artist as something which is contingent and even precarious?

ROA: Yes, in a sense... In 1985 there was a really strong earthquake in Mexico City that tore down many buildings in the urban area. On that day my father, who is a journalist, took me to school after the shock. On the way we saw a collapsed building and he parked the car and said 'you aren't going to school today, you are coming with me' and he grabbed his pencil and notebook and off we went to try and access the wrecked area to interview people. What I found most remarkable about that experience was how his profession allowed him (a total stranger) access to a then restricted site and to the very personal stories of people by just uttering four words: 'I am a journalist'. That stayed with me and at some point provoked a question: "Can I do that as an artist?" In time my work began accessing areas that might seem restricted and this in turn allowed me to encounter different people and wove my practice intricately to the Other. And of course when something depends on someone or something else, there is always uncertainty as you can't control it. Martin Heidegger suggested that each person's being included 'being-with', an innate capacity for understanding the Other. Exercising this capability and encountering its limits has been a constant in my work.

GT: And if you were not an artist, what would you be?

ROA: An extra, an office worker, a gardener, a chef.

Extra-Extra runs from 16 June – 31 July 2010 at  
The Kowalsky Gallery at DACS, 33 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DX

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