

On Wanting Images and Shared Responsibilities. Belkis Ramírez's "De la Misma Madera"

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Abstract: This article will borrow W.J.T. Mitchell's iconological analysis in order to examine the work of Dominican artist Belkis Ramírez, whose installations show an interest in challenging the role of the spectator and in propelling her/him to act critically. I will focus here on the installation "De la misma madera", an artwork awarded the first prize in the 1994 edition of the Dominican Biennial of that year and one of the most recognized installations of contemporary Dominican art. I argue that installations such as De la misma madera exemplify the interest of contemporary Caribbean artists in troubling the position of the spectator as well as in generating a pedagogy of images that can be approached only through experience. By those means, Ramírez challenges a direct adscription of her work to the task of illustrating any specific issue. In this article I explore how this ambivalence generates a concern on expressive freedom and emotive emancipation that transcends passive contemplation and representation.

Keywords: Agency, Caribbean, Installation Art, Belkis Ramírez, Spectatorship

This article examines the artistic production of Dominican artist Belkis Ramírez, who represented her country in the 55th edition of the Venice Biennial in 2013, and whose installations have always expressed a concern on social responsibility and critical engagement with creativity and spectatorship. I will focus here on *De la misma madera* (1994), one of Ramírez's first and most celebrated and discussed installations, which had a strong repercussion in Dominican artistic milieu and helped widespreading the medium of installation art in Dominican Republic. In this article I will analyze how Ramírez's installations constitute a source of "visual pedagogy", using images as to demand an active engagement from the side of the public. *De la misma madera* constitutes a good example of the *demanding* condition of Ramírez's imagery. Their installations propel us to adopt a determinate position towards heterogeneous issues, troubling our certainty. By so doing, she produces a special awareness of the spatial context in which the artworks are inserted, challenging stable and unproblematic conceptualizations of identity and responsibility and questioning the centrality of representation within Caribbean visual practices. The question of engagement is inherent to installation art, since the medium demands the spectator to experience the artwork, engaging with the objects and the images contained in it in several ways.

Born in Santiago Rodríguez (Dominican Republic) in 1957, Ramírez was trained as an architect and as an artist at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo. Her early career is linked to engraving; nevertheless, her most important contribution to contemporary Dominican art history has to do with her interest in transcending the two-dimensional character of engraving and her incursion in sculpture and installation (Casa de América 2002, 136). Ramírez's installations occupy a central role in contemporary Dominican art, being part of an innovative position interested in experimenting with

new artistic languages and including cultural references from a transnational context. In that sense we can mention installations such as *Reloj no marques las horas* (1992) or *De la misma madera* (1994), both of them awarded in the category of installation in the Dominican national biennial. In her installations, Ramírez aims to generate a more active implication of the spectator, developing a critical regard based on images leading to a challenging of any straightforward understanding of the elements integrated in each composition.

De la misma madera exemplifies the interest of Ramírez in analyzing the limitations and the possibilities of addressing the Dominican social texture through art and images. An oversized slingshot, stuck in a pile of small rocks, aims at a mural where a composition formed by heterogeneous portraits stands for “Dominican society”. Some stones are dispersed in the floor, denoting that the artifact has already been used, but also inciting the audience to shoot again. The spectator enters the scene without knowing if she/he is committed to shoot or if she/he is part of the mural and consequently of the targeted audience. The title, *De la misma madera* (from the same wood), reinforces this interchangeable role. In this sense, *De la misma madera* exemplifies a common aspect of Ramírez’s installations of the late eighties and the early nineties: an interest for troubling the position of the public and, at the same time, to encourage new ways of looking at images taken from the public sphere and everyday contexts. Without losing a personal dimension, exemplified by the importance of the human figure and the commonness of the portraiture, Ramírez questions the position of the individuals within a social medium marked by lack of communication, by misunderstandings and exclusions. This focus on communication is important, since it portrays the interest of the artist in creating a language intertwined with vernacular sayings. She does so by referring to popular, highly suggestive expressions that become the title of her artworks (*Equipaje de mano* [Hand luggage]; *más fuerte que la hiedra* [Stronger than ivy]; *Vaivén* [Swinging]; *Con el mar a cuestras* [Carrying the sea]; *El peso de la conciencia* [The weight of conscience]; *Hermanas de sangre* [Blood Sisters] or *De la misma madera* itself can be good examples of that). (fig. 1)

In *De la misma madera*, the collection of portraits hanging on the wall presents a complicate status. At first, one may think that they are a caricature or a mirror of Dominican society. This version will lead us to a very straightforward interpretation, being the work a tool for dismantling or subverting a set of hierarchies, a very precise state of things. Many interpretations seem to corroborate this point, as the one of Laura Gil, who has interpreted this mosaic as a “metaphor of the dehumanisation and self-deception surrounding men and women” (2002, 138), or Elena Pellegrini’s, which identifies it as a “metaphor of humanity that can be understood in different ways” (1997, unpaginated). However,



Fig. 1. Belkis Ramírez, *De la misma madera*, 1994, Santo Domingo, variable dimensions.

although it acknowledges the troubling of the position of the spectator staged by the artwork, there is something lacking from this perspective. For the presence of the spectator and the device aiming at the portraits difficult the conception of those faces as mere representations of specific personalities or even as common types. As in all the production of Ramírez, there is an interest in disorienting the perception of the meaning, inserted through the introduction of a playful element that seeks to confound the position of the artwork, of the spectator, and of the artist herself. In this case, this element arises from the fact that some of the characters portrayed at the wall are less recognizable than others. They range from very precise and identifiable images to just outlined silhouettes. Those can be identified less with unknown characters than with the fractures from where the spectator is captured and included into the frame. They can be recognized, distinguished and consequently targeted, but at the same time they can be anyone else, even the person looking at them.

Looking for a point of comparison, Belgian artist James Ensor's *Self Portrait with Mask* of 1899 comes to mind when looking at Ramírez's woodprint multitude. As in the case of Ensor, we face an accumulation of distorted, caricature-like faces, yet in Ramírez's case irony is not as viral as in the self portrait of the Belgian painter. It is precisely because of this difference that we can identify ourselves with them, and even exchange our position with theirs. If we have to imagine the position that the artist occupies within this landscape, it is harder to think in an opposing or singularized one when considering *De la misma Madera*. For both the artist and the spectator share the same condition of the masked multitude. The indistinctness of all the figures reinforces Ramírez's aim of implicating the spectator and complicating her/his position. More than a fresco of Dominican society, then, the target of the *slingshot* is a structure that distorts whatever it has in front. But at the same time, it is a gate that tries to capture us, to render us part of the mosaic and to eradicate the distance between the image and the beholder. Those faces are not there just to be stared at, they stare back at us, demanding the dissolution between the position they occupy and the one we are at.

We have seen how *De la misma madera* puts the spectator in a troubled position by the ambivalence of being looking at the artwork and being included in it at the same time. But there is something else that makes us unable to describe the figures appearing in her installations as mere portraits. This "wanting *oecumene*" is looking at us as we look at them. But apart from that, ultimately, they demand another reaction from us. They want something else. In this case, our implication comes not only by the recognition that we could be any of those figures, that our position is interchangeable with theirs and we can be part of the same wooden album. Those figures are not just there to be looked at. They are asking us to shoot at them. Our response, then, is not only conditioned by our implication within a social organism to whom we belong; it is also mediated by the stimulus images generate on us. Participation, in that sense, is as important as implication, being this feature a key part of installation medium. Participation also implies the creation of new relations among persons and things that modify the meaning and the position those occupy within the installation, but also beyond it, in "real life" (Groys 2008, 73). For Groys, installation art operates as an antithesis of the techniques of reproduction outlined by Benjamin in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Benjamin's aura implies the belonging to a temporal and spatial uniqueness.

Since an installation integrates objects and materials supposedly without a specific context, it re-contextualizes them.

Similarly, in Ramírez's work, images request something from us, and we are compelled to answer. Her installations can be thus read from a perspective close to the W.J.T. Mitchell's aim of picture theory, that is, to address directly not only the meaning but also the influence and ultimately, the agency of images. The distinction between picture and image is important in Mitchell's work. The distance between the two concepts is exemplified by Mitchell (2005, 85) by saying that "*you can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image*". This distinction allows Mitchell to recognize materiality and objecthood in the visual without dismissing the conceptual side of images. For Mitchell, the role of the image goes far beyond representation, having a direct influence on our behavior and interacting with us in complex ways:

The question of desire is ideally suited for this inquiry because it builds in at the outset a crucial ambiguity. To ask, what do pictures want? Is not just to attribute to them life and power and desire, but also to raise the question of what it is they lack, what they do not possess, what cannot be attributed to them. To say, in other words, that pictures "want" life or power does not necessarily imply that they have life or power, or even that they are capable of wishing for it. It may simply be an admission that they lack something of this sort, that it is missing or (as we say) "wanting". (2005, 10)

Precisely, the multitude in *De la misma madera* appears as an uncomfortable presence because it shares the ambivalence between the mesmerizing and the harmless condition depicted by Mitchell (2008). The faces portrayed in the mural are subjected to the reaction of the audience, but at the same time they have the power of disturbing the beholder, of provoking a reaction by her/his side. It is this ambivalence what difficult an easy adscription of the artwork to a specific issue or to a specific context. This is useful in order to alert us on the dangers of over-identification that has permeated an important part of the criticism of Caribbean art of the nineties.

In *De la misma madera*, the *liveliness* of images is portrayed above all by the *slingshot* itself. Its materiality shares the concern for the environment and the human interactions present in Ramírez's work from early moments. The object that we can engage with was formerly a tree. At the same time, it exemplifies a symbolic and material process of transformation from a tree to a tool, from a living being to an image. In fact, the piece is part of a set of installations that the artist made in the early nineties. In those, she gathered several tree forks from a space under construction located by her house in Santo Domingo. The location was at the side of the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo campus, in a cultural and protected environment. The consequences of modernization, then, lie at the origin of this transformation, and the artwork could be related as well with the constructive frenzy developed during the government of Joaquín Balaguer in the country. Being this reference important and present in many works of Ramírez, we will not explore it further in this case, since our main interest lies in examining how the installational practice of our artist defies the adscription to specific issues. In the same way, we can also find a concern on race and the racial definition of the nation in

historical terms, being the anxiety of categorization and differentiation introduced by the mural a reflection of the racial politics undertaken by Trujillo, as the artist asserted when I interviewed her in Santo Domingo in 2012. But to read *De la misma madera* as an ecological claim or as a direct critique towards racial politics or to some aspects of the Balaguer government is too simplistic. As we have seen, the ambivalence of the objects integrated in the installation is materialized as a demand of responsibility and implication, something reinforced by the personal history of the tree fork that now has become a weapon. The final destiny of some of the forks, burnt by the artist in a big installation placed in front of the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM), reinforces this “animist” interpretation (fig. 2). The Museo de Arte Moderno was created in 1976 within the context of Plaza de la Cultura Juan Pablo Duarte, a cultural project promoted by President Joaquín Balaguer that included several museums and



Fig. 2. Belkis Ramírez, *Condenados*, 1996, Santo Domingo, variable dimensions. Image courtesy of the artist.

cultural institutions (Karman Cubiñá 2001, 14). The MAM is responsible of the oldest national biennial in the Caribbean, and from the nineties it developed the Caribbean Biennial out of a former UNESCO project. A sense of lack of institutional support and a need of renovating the artistic debate has been present in the agenda of many Dominican artists from the last two decades. Ramírez’s choosing of the location for this action can thus be perceived not as a specific critique towards MAM, but as a general concern on the incapacities of the national artistic system:

In front of my apartment, the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo had a whole area full of trees, that part in front of us [she points]. One day I woke up with a deafening noise, they were chopping all the trees. The neighbors went out to see what was happening, and when we saw that they were cutting down everything, without knowing why, we really felt as if they were raping us all, and we asked, alarmed...It was pointless, they said they were building something, and that was all. I, without knowing what to do, as I already had the idea of El Tirapiedras, told them I was paying ten pesos (then it was a lot of money) for each tree fork they could provide me. From those forks I created several installations, I recycled the wood from one to the next one, and finally I used them for an artwork I proposed to a national biennial. I had my motivations, I wanted them to die in front of the museum, because those “sticks” had a long history for me [...] I did four installations with them. I placed them there, I planted them in concrete. I entitled the piece “Condenados”. They died out there [...] (Personal interview with the artist, Santo Domingo, 2012, our translation)

The biography of the slingshot *qua* object, thus, is significant, and reinforces the demands made by the engraved portrait mural. It embodies the contradictions of enacted violence, since it is the result of a

violent process of destruction and change that turns against the faces of the mural. It also connects with Mitchell's theorization of images as living beings that interact with us and modify our attitudes. To experience the installation, to be there, implies to alter our perception of the images and the objects that integrate it. In that sense, we are not just committed to identify ourselves with the victims of violence or with the aggressor; the display of the installation can be seen as a device that allows us to learn something from the experience of being there and from the things surrounding us. Images, or better, pictures, understood as objectified images are teaching us valuable insights about citizenship and modernization, about social involvement and ecology, about responsibility and violence.

The reach of *De la misma madera* is also connected to the emotions it evokes in the audience. The portraits in *De la misma madera* are waiting for us to shoot at them. But as they integrate us in the same photograph, as we lose sight of the distance that separates "us" from "them", as we are part of the same genealogy, we probably would not want to do it. The experience of the installation, achieved through the "wanting" nature of images, expresses its aesthetic value through the emotions and feelings it raises. As the polarization between the spectator and the actor have disappeared (or at least blurred), we are faced with the need to rethink our position within the social community and to measure our feelings towards others. An emancipative value arises, then, from engagement, as Claire Bishop has pointed out: "*This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipator, since it is analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world. A transitive relationship therefore comes to be implied between 'activated spectatorship' and active engagement in the social-political arena*" (2005, 11).

It is also important to bear in mind that there is no narrative, no master issue in *De la misma madera*. This is a point the artist herself has strived to maintain through her career, especially to avoid the classification of her work under the label of "feminist art". Many installations made by Ramírez between 1995 and 2005 frequently included female portraits dealing with different experiences of mobility. This coincided with a period when Ramírez travelled extensively and faced the reality of Dominican women subjected to prostitution or impoverishment (fig. 3). The point made by the artist when addressing those artworks, however, does reinforce the ambivalence portrayed by installations such as *De la misma madera*. This openness is a key part of the artwork, because it increases the effectiveness of the assertive task Ramírez confers to images. In that sense, the use of installation art can be connected with the will of our artist to ensure a space for aesthetics outside the field of discourse and categorization. Identity and Over-identification appeared as a common obstacle for Caribbean artists during the nineties, when the international interest generated an anxiety that conditioned in many case the results and the interpretations. Created in the middle of the decade, *De la misma madera* achieved thus to



Fig. 3. Belkis Ramírez, *De Mar en peor*, 2001, Santo Domingo, variable dimensions. Image courtesy of the artist.

evade the subordination of aesthetics to difference, maintaining a terrain for criticism. The work of Ramírez has been often explained in terms of representation of gender and ethnic difference. A vast amount of her production has to do with female prostitution, migration and self-acceptance. In all those cases, nevertheless, a major interest in the visual and its pedagogical capacities surpasses the adscription of the meaning to a single group or single predicament, generating strong arguments against “*the fatal capture [of art] by discourse*” (Rancière 2004, 9). Seen from this perspective, Ramírez’s installations can hardly be identifiable with a reaction arose from a local, localized, context. Rather, the emphasis on emotions and experience gives its message a more open role.

Ramírez has been part of a generation of Dominican artists who have engaged actively in generating a context where innovative artistic discourses could be possible. Artists Jorge Pineda, Marcos Lora Read, Raúl Recio, Tony Capellán, Raquel Paiewonsky, David Pérez “Karmadavis” or Pascal Meccariello, to name just a few, share an interest for transforming the terrain where Dominican and Caribbean art was exhibited, discussed and distributed. All of them were decisive in promoting the use of media such as video art, installation or performance as common elements of Dominican art, defying creative notions of national art based on an immutable tradition installed by academic models. They sought to widespread a critical concern and a forum of debate which could reach the entire region. This transformation took place in a moment when Caribbean artists entered a decisive moment marked by what Sassen (2000, 215-232) has called the “*moving away of cultural locales*”. During the nineties, Ramírez and other fellow artists join some of the most important stages of the international art circuit, which echoes in their local context as a broadening of cultural critique. This process has been often explained as a consequence of postcolonial difference; as we have seen through the analysis of *De la misma madera*, it cannot be understood without the commitment of many of those artists to address this predicament from a critical position that could remain linked to esthetic presuppositions.

In this way, the trajectory of Ramírez exemplifies the possibilities that installation art opened for Caribbean artists in order to transform the politics of spectatorship implicit in their home countries and to transcend the limitations of their contexts (fig. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4. Belkis Ramírez, *Reconstruyéndonos*, 2009, Santo Domingo, variable dimensions. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5. Belkis Ramírez, *Reconstruyéndonos* (detail), 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.

Dominican installation art has been celebrated as a key factor of this process of artistic renovation within the Caribbean (Lockward 2006; Garrido 2014; Ginebra 2009; Miller 2002). Artworks such as *De la misma madera* have been recognized as major contributions to the region's art history. This article has tried to explain how those symbols of artistic modernization aimed not so much to introduce new artistic media, than to expose and subvert the contradictions of systems of representation and art genealogies. Its pedagogical interest lies, thus, not only in its ability to address specific issues, but in its capacity to foster a deeper understanding of the role of images and imageries and of our complicate relation with them. In this sense, *De la misma madera* appears not only as a valuable example of the first steps of the installational tradition, but also as a critical and complex mechanism of a still ongoing critical and emancipative project that has been significantly disregarded to this date.

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