

I first met Jorge Macchi in 1998, in a workshop on experimentation in theater which brought together a group of writers, composers, theater directors, and visual artists. I'm a composer and sound artist, so we met on my turf, in the territory of the performing arts. My involvement with the visual arts was minimal then. I recall that one of Jorge's first interventions in the ensuing works was to emphatically suggest, if not demand outright, that I stop using the term "plastic artists," which was generically used in Argentina at that time. "Visual artists" was the term he preferred, which, as you can see, I agreed to use.

We began working together at the end of that first year in the realm of theater—on projects we jointly developed and on a few others—and also in his territory, that of the visual arts. Jorge works with readymade and ordinary objects in the form of newspaper clippings, city maps, and music sheets. Buenos Aires Tour has to have been our first true collaborative work: it is a guidebook of Buenos Aires containing eight different itineraries determined by the cracks on a broken glass pane. Forty-six points of interest were chosen at random: they do not represent the city's most interesting sites, but they rather offer a glimpse into an ephemeral and marginal Buenos Aires. As a guide to the city it is not the most useful, as it is based on the contributions of the collaborators in the project: Jorge's objects, poet María Negroni's texts, and my sound pieces. Since Buenos Aires Tour Jorge and I have developed installations in which the visual and sonic increasingly became merged, structurally and perceptually. Our most recent project, Little Music, for instance, was developed for Prospect.1 New Orleans. Inspired by a tradition dating from the pre-Katrina days, we gifted the city with five paddle boats for the public to ride in the City Park. We wanted music to return to New Orleans: as users paddle the boats, they activate a giant kalimba, or African thumb piano.

It's been thrilling to see our work evolve over time, and the line between two media, two heads, and two sensibilities continue to fade. Although I live in Berlin and not Argentina, we've been talking for over ten years. Frankly, I hope our collaboration never comes to an end.

Edgardo Rudnitzky Good morning, Jorgito! Shortly after I received the invitation from BOMB to interview you, and having mulled it over without taking any particular action, I got the sense that this was an excellent opportunity to reinitiate a part of our dialogue, which tends to be interrupted by exchanges on the issues in our lives that preoccupy us, by the urgency of solving work-related matters, and by the brevity of our encounters scattered all around the world. So I've slowly begun to approach the pleasurable idea of simply having a conversation—what's more, I've given myself the "task" of reading some articles that have been written about your work and some essays that you've written, and to mentally relive phantom versions of our chats. There are many points of inquiry, a number of which recur and about which I myself am passionate: fiction, music, conceptual art, chance and its inevitability, the real and the verisimilar, as well as a number of other questions that will arise out of this epistolary encounter.

Conceptual Art

ER Let's start at the beginning. The first time I heard of Macchi was in Buenos Aires, in the early '90s. The person who was attempting to describe you to me spoke enthusiastically about your work and called you a conceptual artist. Far from enthusing me, this triggered all my prejudices and judgments about conceptual art. However, at that very moment I saw some images of a few of your pieces and I was fascinated by them, which made me think that either I should revisit my ideas about conceptual art, or that perhaps your work didn't fall under the category. In a number of reviews and newspaper articles, and in catalogue essays, you've been defined as conceptual, neoconceptual, and postconceptual. Labels don't interest me, but I'd like for us to talk about your thinking as an artist, your work and its relation, or lack thereof, to so-called conceptual art.

Jorge Macchi I'm absolutely against categorizations. Their function is to tranquilize the spectator. What we do partakes of a complexity that no taxonomy could possibly ever reduce. But, all right, it's a totally globalized trend and it's necessary to contend with it. If we look at conceptual art as a tendency that reduces formal considerations and subordinates them to an idea, I couldn't be further from that. In general, I begin with images that at some particular moment locate their specific medium and, with luck, might trigger interesting ideas in the spectator. In my case, the idea of the work does not exist prior to the image. Ideas arise out of a later analysis of forms. With respect to labels like "postconceptual" or "neoconceptual," those terms are so broad that in the end they prove not to be determining. My work results from the superimposition of a range of varied influences, and not just from those that originate in conceptual art. Why not attempt to understand complexity rather than reduce it?

ER I don't have a response, though I do agree with you. Jorge Luis Borges addresses this in "The Analytic Language of John Wilkins," from which I quote a brief excerpt: "...notoriously, there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason for this is very simple: we don't know what sort of thing the universe is." And now that we're onto Borges, whom I know is one of your favorites, I am reminded of *Fictions*, a wonderful book that presents a universe in which, I think, some of your works might find space to breathe.

Fiction

ER You wrote two texts in 2001, one for the exhibition catalogue *El final del eclipse* (The End of the Eclipse) in Madrid and the other for the Buenos Aires-based theater magazine *Funámbulos*. These texts presumably don't speak to the same issues, but I think they have a strong common link. In the first, you talk about a clipping of a story in a London newspaper about a drunken babysitter who accidentally crushed the baby she was taking care of—you kept it for years. You wrote: "It doesn't matter now what I did with that clipping. I cite it here because it contains two elements that generally attract my attention: accidents and debris. One alludes to the story itself; the other to what happens in that story after one reads it in the newspaper. The tragic story of the baby is one of the many improbable and random events constructing reality. Yet the story's impact

is ephemeral: one forgets it as soon one turns the page; the baby gets lost amid the stories on politicians or horseraces, and becomes detritus, just like the newspaper does. I wonder if work about detritus might not be a primitive and degenerated form of photography. In fact, both things seek to halt or slow deterioration and disappearance.”

In the other text, the word “fiction” appears numerous times and you talk about a period when you were “getting dangerously close to theater.” I quote you: “I said ‘dangerously’ and I think it’s an apt term to define a visual artist’s fear in the face of the phenomenon of theatrical representation. On the other hand, and I can’t generalize here either, visual artists feel a certain mistrust of fiction. Perhaps I’m a little insistent on this point, but one of the most important things the workshop on experimentation in theater offered me was an awareness of fiction. There was a precise moment when I began to understand something about the phenomenon of theater: I read an article about Bacon and I saw Galileo of Galilei in Rubén Szuchmacher’s staging. In the article, Bacon said he didn’t just frame his paintings, but also put glass in front of them, so as to perfectly delimit the parameters of the artifice...” In both texts you’re talking about fiction, about the problem of representation. Fiction and representation à la Brecht, and perhaps that’s why you mention Brecht’s Galileo, which heightens the distance between art and life, or even Dolezel’s “possible-worlds” theory, which proposes that the barrier between reality and fiction is temporarily blurred when readers readily accept the rules that stories or novels sets forth. How is fiction articulated in your work?

JM It’s not by chance that you were one of the coordinators of that workshop on experimentation in theater in which I participated in 1998, and that ten years later we’re working together on so many projects. For me that workshop was an important experience, and produced a significant change in my way of working. At that time I was developing *Seis historias de amor* (Six Love Stories), a performance piece that consisted of transmitting radio novels via intercoms. I wanted to document it on video, but both the image and sound were highly deficient. Was the documentation of the piece as important as the piece itself? After I showed it, the question was more pressing: was it necessary for the performance in the video to have actually happened in order for the video to be effective? Wouldn’t it have been much better to have adequate imagery and sound in the video, even if the action itself never took place?

I remember that in the workshop we argued about Walter De Maria’s Vertical Earth Kilometer, where a kilometer-long brass pole was driven into the ground, with only the very top showing. For the artist it was undoubtedly important for the kilometer to exist underground, but for the spectator who only sees a tiny portion of that kilometer and will never know if it exists or if it ends after 50 centimeters, that truth—is it really important? At that moment the comment seemed sacrilegious to me, a comment that could only come out of the mouth of a theater person, dedicated, that is, to pure fiction, to set design. Everything after that contained some reflection about that question: De Maria’s kilometer is always on my mind when I’m pondering a new work.

That workshop helped me realize that I too was a producer of fiction, of a different nature than theatrical fiction, but fiction just the same. The direct consequence of this was that the work's formal elements became more important to me, perhaps to the detriment of the truth, whatever that is. Formal elements—color, form—are important entryways into the work. They seduce the viewer, like carnivorous plants.

ER Heidegger said that art allows reality to emerge; that quote, a little out of context, could spark an eternal conversation, but we'll avoid that. I think that in and of itself, art is never truth (nor should it be), it's verisimilitude: it is credible for the spectator but isn't in itself TRUTH. Now, the materials you use, your media, are in fact real and sometimes also verisimilar, as when you work with found objects or clippings from newspapers or magazines, where the medium and the work coincide.

How do you decide on a medium and process for each piece? How do you encounter the imagery that materializes as drawings and paintings?

JM Materiality is precisely what irremediably separates, for me, visual arts from theater, and it was one of my principal difficulties in facing the idea of set design. While onstage, what matters is the external appearance of a material—that is, what it represents. In the works I develop outside the theater, what matters to me is that the material be recognizable. If I work with a page from the newspaper, I want it to be recognized as newsprint despite whatever I do with it, because my interest is located in the dialogue between the material and what that material conveys to each spectator. The most typical example is a work titled Monoblock, a building constructed out of obituary pages, emptied of their texts, on which remain only the crosses or stars determining the religion of the deceased. For me, what matters lies in the collision of the representation of the building and the reality of the material. And speaking of collisions, this is the process I use at the moment I contemplate a new project. Everything starts with an image, a sort of surprise in the midst of the linearity of daily experience. If that image persists, I try to make it real—that is, to allow it to transit from my imagination to a specific support or medium for the work. For me, drawing is the first step in this transformation and in some cases the process doesn't move beyond this stage. These are the instances when the image is put down on paper in a very rapid, concrete way, and needs no further development. In other cases, drawing is the beginning of a process of seeking the medium or material that might successfully extract what is most important out of the image in question. If I have to say which aspects of the work are my obsessions at that moment, I'd say medium specificity and synthesis. I'm the opposite of a baroque artist. When I finish a piece I'm just barely beginning to feel that I've managed to give an image materiality.

ER Indeed, a sort of Renaissance artist, since there is apparently no medium that intimidates you and among all those you use—video, film, paper, collage, painting, drawing, photography, light, sculpture, and performance—there is a communicative Macchi flow.

JM The multiplicity of media has to do with the specific relationship I attempt to establish between images and materials. In general, the thing that's most important about a piece should move behind the surface, and, in this sense, the variety of media I use matters very little. In general, when I show my work, I try to allow works that are materially very different from one another to coexist. My intention is that spectators will perceive an underground river passing through all the objects, though I couldn't specify the name of that river.

Music

ER Among these elements, music makes a recurring appearance in your work. I'm not only referring to the fact that your work "sounds," but also to the fact that its construction involves "compositional" criteria, resources that are absolutely musical. Music can also be an observed object in your work.

JM I have a fairly conflicted relationship with music—or better said, with music production. When I was a teenager I decided to learn piano. I studied intensely for eight years. But I had two serious problems: I had no ear, and it was difficult for me to read sheet music. I've always admired people who sit down in front of a score and begin to play. That was something that took me months. And because it was so complicated, by sheer will I made myself learn the music by heart as quickly as possible. But in order to retain the notes in my head, I needed to play all the pieces I knew every day. As soon as I stopped playing them, I'd forget them and I had to return to the torture of the score. During a certain period, I didn't have a piano. Then, when I finally did have the possibility of getting a piano again, I felt incapable of doing anything with it. I couldn't remember the pieces I had once known, I couldn't improvise, and I couldn't read my old sheet music. Nonetheless, I remembered the pleasure of playing the instrument. The intense years of study coincided with my teenage years and also with the dictatorship in Argentina. Perhaps there's no direct relationship between one thing and another but there is something about my frustration with music that I relate with my frustration and adolescent melancholy during that time period.

Beyond these considerations, music appears in some of my work because it's an essentially formal language. If I think about the moment when a more intense dialogue between visual arts and music began—it corresponds with the time I began to work closely with theater, discovered fiction, and began to give more consideration to formal elements.

ER Though I knew about your history with the piano, this is the first time I've heard you tell it in this way. I don't know why, but your show this past summer at the Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Round Midnight (another in a long list of musical titles you use in your work) immediately came to mind. Also, that was the first time I saw a significant quantity of your drawings all together. Of course, in a number of those the piano as an object is represented, but it's not that—what I felt when I saw them, and now listening to your story, makes me think that for you drawing is like playing the piano without a score, its immediacy makes the "music" possible.

JM I'm thinking that if it hadn't been for this conversation, we never would have talked about this. I totally agree with what you say and the odd thing is that it's a surprise for me. I draw exactly the same way I would like to play the piano: an image appears and I try to materialize it on the paper as quickly as possible, and when I think it's basically been established, I leave it in that state. My drawings are not virtuosic, they're rushed, immediate, and, above all, simple, contextless—they're images floating on the white space of the paper. Something like the perfect and simple version of "Throw it Away" by the jazz singer Cassandra Wilson: a dialogue between the voice and the double bass.

Chance

ER You talked about how impossible it is for you to improvise on the piano. Improvisation in music might be read in two ways: from the perspective of the listener, it's a sort of an instantaneous and ephemeral chance creation, while for the performer, the instantaneous is strongly linked to experience, to memories of various types, and is, consequently, not so ephemeral. Chance is simply a trick of perception that creates the appearance, and even the belief, that the performer has encountered notes and phrases in passing. In a number of your works—perhaps the most emblematic here would be Buenos Aires Tour—found materials, the ephemeral, the "accidental," become the substance of the piece. How does chance function for Macchi?

JM I don't know if the same thing happens to you, but I have a constant feeling that everything might change irremediably or catastrophically from one moment to the next. It's a feeling I particularly get when I'm walking down the street and I see people and cars passing by, and everything seems to be ordered as if it had been choreographed. I don't know if it's the influence of the cinema of catastrophe or if the cinema of catastrophe is so successful because many people share my feeling. A while ago I did a piece titled *Tiempo real* (Real time): a supposedly digital clock affixed to the wall, the numbers of which are made out of matches which mark real time via a rudimentary process of animation. Everything occurs in a fluid way over 24 hours and, of course, none of the matches ever light and destroy the image, but the danger of a chain reaction is there, latent in every moment. As you'll realize, my relationship with chance is fairly neurotic. Chance is what can't be dominated, what can't be controlled, and while in some cases chance leads to agreeable situations, in general I associate it with tragic situations. That's why my work constructs fictions in which I can control chance, freeze it, repeat it. Even when music is a consequence of chance (though I do understand what you say about improvisation and chance), what appears in the first place is an obsessive desire to assign sense or logic to the nonsensical. That's how I understand the work we developed in Buenos Aires Tour: a tourist guide of Buenos Aires based on a chance operation like the breaking of a window, a project focused more on the creation of meaning than on the superficial description of a city.

ER Yes, I share that feeling that everything might change irremediably (though I try to avoid thinking "catastrophically") from one moment to the next and I also share that image of daily life in which everything seems to be dramatically

ordered as if it were choreographed—a feeling that for me becomes terrifying when I'm buried in a walkman (ancient word, no?) which then modifies my perception of that dramatic charge according to the music that's playing.

Everything is perfect until the choreographer or one of the dancers gets distracted and... bang! Destiny, karma, synchronicity, God?

I always remember this gigantic wall panel in your studio where tools and phone numbers for taxis and food delivery services coexist alongside a variety of religious images—a mix I've found in other corners of your studio and in your house. What links this imagery with your work?

JM That wall, unlike my work, developed organically. It came into existence without a plan, simply as an accumulation of images and texts, photographs, tools and newspaper clippings, with no relationship between one thing and another. And there are many religious images and lots of humor. Now I look at it and I can trace my interests, my fears, and my obsessions from the last 20 years. One of those clippings says: "Macchi will stop to think." I remember perfectly when I found that headline—which obviously didn't refer to me, but rather to a judge in some shady case from the '90s—at a moment when I'd just returned from a long and conflicted stay in Europe with an urgent need to stop and think. That wall panel is an intimate diary and, at the same time, a calendar and address book. Imperceptibly it became a necessity. It didn't have any direct relationship with the images in my art projects, but it's part of that underground river I was talking about before: a feeling or a climate that's very difficult to define in words.

Collaborations

ER Now that we're in Yokohama, far from our homes in Berlin and Buenos Aires, I'm tempted to talk about working in collaboration, about how that work is articulated. In this sense we've followed different paths. I began working in collaboration very early, as a percussionist in orchestras and chamber music groups, as a composer working very closely with performers, and later became involved in the performing arts for a long time. In recent years I've been moving toward more solitary work. In your case, you began and went on working on your own for a long time, and only a few years ago was there more space for collaborations in your practice.

JM The first time I worked collaboratively was in 1992. On that occasion, my friend David Oubiña and I made a very short video called *La flecha de Zenón* (Zenon's arrow), which I still like and we continue to show. With that work, I felt that authorship was spread between the two of us evenly and naturally, which for me was entirely unexpected, accustomed as I was to working alone. My experiences in the theater introduced me to another type of collaboration, in which each person develops one element of the production of the work, and in which there is a director who establishes the general concept, which happens in film as well. For me, the theater was important because for the first time I sacrificed my own interests and drives in the service of a larger whole. Another

important element, originating specifically in the phenomenon of theater, is the crossover between different artistic disciplines. Without a doubt, the best collaborations are those in which text, sound, and visual elements work on the same level but at the same time are absolutely dependent on each other. That was the idea behind Buenos Aires Tour, our first piece outside the realm of theater. After these years of intense collaborating, I've come to the conclusion that what makes an interaction like ours possible isn't just sharing interests or aesthetic tastes. A strong relationship as friends, which extends beyond the narrow territory of art, is fundamental.

Translated By Jen Hofer