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Luis Camnitzer

Antonio Caro, 1950-2021



Antonio Caro, Colombia Minería, 2016. Triptych. 72 x 287 cm. Courtesy of Casas Riegner, Bogotá.

There are a handful of artists who, had they made only one piece in their entire lifetime, would still have taken up space within the limited and exclusive real estate offered by art history. Leaving the Mona Lisa and David aside, I'm thinking of Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered cup, Elso Padilla's sculpture of Martí in his *Por América*, maybe a moon painting from the series by José Cúneo, or a slice of cake by Wayne Thiebaud. These are pieces that don't require companions for support and seem to present us with complete discourses within their own singleness. This is not meant to demean of the rest of these artists' production. It only points to their having done the kind of work that elicits a totally satisfying feeling of "that's it," or even better, "that's It." Due to the nature of the history of art—who writes it and who reads it—the historical resonance of a work is generally less than the "universal" renown claimed for it, its impact having registered on a relatively small and exclusive public. Antonio Caro's *Colombia Coca-Cola* (1976) stands out from this story as a work that communicates to the broadest public. Composed with the tools of the adversary, Caro's piece denounces and critically exposes cultural and economic ownership, becoming an awareness-raising icon. By coincidence, the work was done the same year Richard Dawkins decided to use the word "meme" to refer to viral cultural units. Caro's piece immediately became an example, unknowingly setting a precedent for the digital memes to come and their use as a means of collective and popular expression.

Antonio died on March 29, 2021, apparently from heart failure, the primary organ he used to generate his works. He died prematurely at the age of seventy. He has been one of the few irreplaceable characters in the art of the South American continent, and luckily, his work will remain and compensate for his leaving us.

I met Antonio in 1978 during a trip to Bogotá, a year before he had, as a performance, publicly slapped a well-known art critic who had blocked his acceptance into the National Salon.

When we met he was still a new artist, one who, with few exceptions, was still looked upon with distrust. I would subsequently reencounter him each time I returned to Colombia. It didn't matter what city it was. In one of his secret performances he always appeared among groups of people gathered to discuss art issues with me. He wasn't there to say anything or to tell me anything. He was only collecting acts of presence, with me as an anonymous accessory to his piece.

On other occasions we had a cup of coffee, the last one three years ago, also in Bogotá. Always the same over four decades, Antonio was ignorant of mirrors and, apparently, living off whatever was in the knapsack his back seemed to have excreted. In an interview with Lucas Ospina, he acknowledged the importance of poverty and his habit of only wearing T-shirts that were gifted to him: "My art was poor, I had to make things with very precarious materials and that's why I had to think a little, and maybe that helped me quite a bit." In spite of himself, since it wasn't an affectation, he had become a Colombian icon. Always very formal in his language and overly respectful in his dialogue, his contributions to discussion were mostly questions. He asked for opinions about general problems while he hid his own. In what seemed to be an absence of intellectualism there was the careful construction of a chess player. In symposia he revealed that his apparent absentmindedness was preparation for a surgery that led to the dissection and demolition of his interlocutor. Always done with humor and tenderness, this was coupled with an irony that only took effect some time later.

Back in 1995 I wrote an article in which I described him as a "visual guerrilla." I chose the phrase not to reflect a political position but to describe the manner in which he attacked the expectations about art in that moment. He didn't act as an ideological and combative spokesperson, and neither did he try to explicitly collapse the scaffolding that supports art. His actions were much more subtle. His work escaped aesthetic canons, but did so by grazing them. Some of his pieces had a perfect, quasi-industrial finish, profiting from what he had learned during a short stint at an advertising agency. Others were close to clumsiness. He took advantage of the crudeness of popular posters, or he exploited the aesthetics of neglect typical of his own presence. In the same interview with Ospina, he reminisced about the first time he went to ask for a visa to the US. He claimed it was denied while he was on his way to the window to ask for the forms.

Although Colombia Coca-Cola synthesizes a country, even a continent, it's the series that refers to Quintín Lame that defines Caro as a visual guerrilla. This is not because of the narrative that surrounds the character of Lame, but for what it means that an artist treats him the way Caro does. Quintín Lame was an indigenous self-taught lawyer dedicated to defending his community against the hegemonic legal system and fighting for the rights of his people. He was jailed 108 times until he died in 1967, five years before Caro started working on the theme. Lame had a peculiarly baroque signature, and the art pieces consisted in reproducing the design. What became important in them was not some anecdote about Lame, but the ignorance of it. The works were simply a reproduction of the signature in different sizes, without the didactic help of biography to explain them. The public confronted an attractive scribble of dubious importance within the formalist times of its presentation. Lame's history, inasmuch as it might be known, then filled the image. This meant that only a very small part of the public within the elitist Colombian audience understood the work.

Once the signature left Colombia, it became nothing more than a pretty doodle. Nearly an unintelligible pictogram, it was unable to compete with other works in the market or achieve any economic viability.

The same way Quintín Lame reinterpreted the legal code of the oppressor in his fight to regain his people's land, Caro's guerrilla action was to repurpose hegemonic aesthetics to reaffirm locality. A quixotic act? Probably. An important, exemplary and memorable act? Definitely.