

Stone and image in the South Andes
A conversation with Luisa Ulibarry
1998

Your work today involves the emptying of the quarry you inhabit and the creation of eighteen granite sculptures, in a sense, a confrontation with matter. Is it legitimate for human beings to aspire to continue to transform matter? If so, why?

That's right, bit-by-bit I empty my quarry, and again, yes, this is a legitimate aspiration, simply because it is what I like to do.

Matter, and myself silently working on each other over the years. This is the most powerful dialectic relationship I have experienced. Everything is here. There is nothing else I need. I have the materials of my sculpture, my stones and my pieces of wood, the subject matter and content of my sculpture: my Maipo river with its irrigation ditches, stone walls. It's geological formations as well as its trees, birds, insects and fossils. The hills of my childhood that I left without ever leaving and to which I have returned, the scenario of my dreams, the places I love and know well, the places where I can see clearly.

I ride out on a mule to gaze from afar and also to look closely, using a magnifying glass. There, lost in the hills, I spend hours amongst the trees, distinguishing between leaves of litre, boldo, ñipa, lun, coronillo, boyen, quillay, huingan, peumo, lingue, corcolen...

I return to my studio, which opens out onto the hills, without walls, without windows, to represent what I have seen in the landscape and in this process of representation, I transform matter.

To say the truth about what one has seen involves still another kind of journey, a journey to examine and select from among a vast number of particulars. In the course of such a quest for exactitude I feel once more the perplexity and emotion of encountering the world to which I am so attached.

This is my choice, to live the chaos of materiality, to get to know aspects of materials, to try and represent materiality through its transformation (stones, in the case of this exhibition)

A group of stones creating an environment that speaks on my behalf.

If, in the end, sculpture finally gives birth to an image, it is in such a way sheathed in matter, to such an extent pushed into and submerged into matter as to become inextricable from it. Therefore, my sculptural language is stubborn to the image.

Put another way, one could say that my wood is the message, that my stone is the message.

I realize this is not so, however. A stone is but a stone yet, at the same time, a stone, no matter how much sculpture is put into it, will continue to be a stone. I have a price to pay to matter on which an image attempts to reside.

Although the image may remain, in changing the material, content escapes, only to be replaced by another. The all-powerful image does not control my sculpture.

The all-powerful image has been the great betrayer of sculpture. If a sculpture wishes to enter the Internet, it must do so through its image. Sculpture must be photogenic and enter into the screen devoid of materiality, weightless and odorless, through the narrow orifice of a camera lens.

Only its image, the wonderful chaos of materiality remains outside.

Devoid of materiality and only without it, a sculpture may become an image of itself and then a sign to be combined with other signs in the structuralist discourse into which sculpture finally disappears together with my quarry, my river and, what is worse, with the poets that accompany me in my journey. These are the founders of American culture: Emerson and Whitman up north and Gabriela Mistral down south.

Finally, I would like to say that in this harsh scenario in which sculpture develops, I move towards the historical pole of attraction of my art: physicality.

What do you think about the sculptors active in the local artistic scene and practice of the past years? About the production of sculpture in relation to a system of thought and representation of the contemporary image that is a legacy of post structuralism and minimalism and, finally, about the presence or absence of “theoretical gurus” in today’s sculpture?

This is undoubtedly a very favorable scenario for sculpture. City parks are filling up with sculptures. New generations of sculptors have places where they can learn the craft. We have created galleries specializing in sculpture. Sculptors who visit us are surprised at this almost unique panorama in the world context.

The weak point is the almost non-existence of adequate theoretical discussion about what is going on. We need theoreticians in our studios, in order to reflect about what we are doing, to project the work into the future, theoreticians who are capable of explaining and promoting the work among the public. The majority approaches sculpture as you say, with little paper dresses, of the kind there used to be in the past in order to try and fit into them.

My impression is that for years now sculpture has no longer fitted such little paper dresses.

This problem is not new and we are just one more generation in the troubled relationship between sculpture and the theoretical systems of each period of history.

Michelangelo had to navigate between the neo-platonic ideas prevalent in his youth and which derived in the flourishing of Early Renaissance and the Counter Reform that cooled down his old age. In order to explain his process, he chose Vasari, a painter, chronicler-theoretician who writes and describes the work from the studio of the master himself.

Rodin invited Rilke, this time a poet, to work from Rodin's position but from the point of view of poetry. Rilke writes about a sculpture table at which Rodin had modeled for years. His words are useful because they almost sink into the clay on that table.

All these writers have characteristics in common. They attempt to understand sculpture, and this effort generates in them admiration for the field of sculpture and that admiration produces respect and a humble attitude in their discourse at once useful to the public and to sculptors.

In Chile and South America, as a broader cultural zone, most thinkers of the visual arts have emerged under the influence of French structuralism and think from the standpoint of the world of language, words, signs and the unconscious, hard pressed to find historical connections, demanding from the visual arts geographical, archaeological and legal-political proposals.

Of all the visual trends today, they only establish some form of dialogue with branches derived of post-dada, minimalist and conceptualist ideas, all of them tendencies positioning the visual artist within the gathering of objects made by others with an attached theoretical discourse, independently of the reality that originates them. For such tendencies, the art object does not exist for its own sake but in terms of its capacity to relate to other objects whose specific existence is not too important and which the artist does not produce on the basis of primary but gathered materials.

Thus, the artistic fields would be defined as follows:

Gathering of secondhand materials with attached theoretical proposal.

Transformation of firsthand matter into silence

Theoreticians, perhaps the most competent, went with the gatherers. We the sculptors remained alone.

There has been no serious reflection about our sculptural practice and effort of the past years.

However, sculpture continues to progress.

The form of the local art system remained linked to language and the main theoretical proposals. It is in this scenario, which is neither useful nor touches upon my way of working, that I have had to move in the past years. In this scenario of generalizations I have opted for the particular. I realized that if I want to contribute something to the field of sculpture I must focus my efforts on work outside the avant-garde movements and within the specificity of my own practice. This same thing happens in the great artistic movements I knew in Europe, such as "British Sculpture" which derives absolutely from its local conditions and whose universal character originates in the specific ration of light that is afforded to Britain, which is why its sculpture is based more on structures than volumes, unlike Mediterranean sculpture for example. British sculpture is made for placement in the green fields of England. We Chilean sculptors had the chance to learn this firsthand when Henry Moore sent his very dear friend Marta Colvin back to Chile because "South America is the continent of sculpture."

I left Europe, where I had reached a limit in terms of what I could learn from its powerful traditions or what I could research scratching the surface of its best traditions. Thus, I left my house and university in England and returned to my garden and my fig trees.

Here, in close and permanent communion with the landscape of my quarry, where I live and work, in the Andean part of the central valley, far from the great art systems in Europe, I opted for the only thing that was truly mine: myself in the landscape.

Water and stone, a river that cuts mountains in two and animal forms that inhabit that environment Coleopterans, insects and minerals, crystals as motifs.

Stone and river, the Maipo River, the winds and the glaciers of its valley are responsible for 50% of the form of the stones in this exhibition. The river polished them on the outside when it passed over them cutting in two the mountain on whose foothills I live. On the opposite bank are the quarries and town of La Obra; on this side, Pirque. I respected as far as I could the forms of these stones, which were created by the river over millions of years.

The stone is granodiorite, the hardest of igneous stones in Chile

The work in exhibition is the outcome of a careful observation of the landscape that surrounds me. There I discovered the great crystals of granite and basalt, hard structures both inside and out, without the elasticity of the human body and trees. Crystals are three-dimensional and mathematical formulas in the midst of the chaos of matter.

Three of these sculptures reproduce, literally, the larger dimensions: an atacamite (copper ore) crystal, one of galena (lead ore) and other of cassiterite (tin ore). Together with the stone crystals I find the coleopterans. The acanthinodera cummingi or madre de la culebra living on the banks of the stream that runs behind my house and which, after dying and being washed away by the water, forms a fine layer on the surface that is the equivalent of its bones. When looking at those great carcasses, emptied of their muscles, when I look inside them, I realize that their interiors are fantastic sculptural caverns. The idea of working on the insides was reaffirmed by the observation of ammonites and fossilized cyrtinas from the Maipo, mollusks that lived millions of years ago.

Many of these sculptures are stones I split, worked on the inside and closed again, leaving a minimum of visual access.

I believe these sculptures have something of the basic configuration of the stone walls of Pirque or pircas.

Occupying citizens' space, the relationship between works that will be inside the gallery and works placed outside in the open space. Public art, landscape as support. The validity of public art at a time when the most public of spaces is the Internet.

The content and material of these sculptures is the same. Five of them have been conceived for larger spaces and were placed out on the street in a space already colonized by sculpture, the median strip on the corner of Americo Vespucio and Vitacura. The remaining eight, were deployed inside the Gallery.

This idea of linking public space and the space of the gallery is not new for Artespacio Gallery, because it has promoted the most important sculptural projects for public spaces in the past years: Sculpture Park at the University of Talca; Ciudad Empresarial in

Santiago; Plaza El Roble, in Chillán; Radomiro Tomic Mining Company in Calama; Mirador CCT Interactive Park, Santiago.

Sculpture is either out in the streets or it simply isn't.

All forms of culture can, to a greater or lesser extent, be shown on the Internet, the new public space. Sculpture cannot.

Perhaps it is this awareness that has led sculptors and the promoters of sculpture to bring it out into the streets with such force.

I think sculpture grows in the citizens' space more than any other form of cultural expression.

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