

There are things I learned in Brazil with my body, and some of these things it has taken me years to learn to articulate in writing. But that is not to say that they were without meaning when I could only speak them through dance.

—Barbara Browning<sup>1</sup>

In photographs, El Palacete del Embarcadero's building looks like a jewel. Its diminutive scale only accentuates its grandeur. Moreover, poised on the very edge of the Cantabrian Sea, without neighbors, it does indeed resemble a gemstone set atop the imaginary ring formed by the bay's shoreline that curves in on either side, and the horizon. Inside the Palacete, I imagine, the natural light must bob—reflected off the waves and in through the windows—and shift colors along with the passing weather. Visualizing that play of light recalls childhood discovery, the optical wonder of studying the facets in my great grandmother Dee Dee's engagement diamond. Likewise, Lucía Warck-Meister's work in progress suggested to me that her first visit to the Palacete—where she will install *Solo tu sombra*—must have left her speechless, overwhelmed by indescribable ideas.

Envisioning all that preciousness may seem antithetical to the analysis of any of Lucía's work. Her flinty intelligence fuels and marks all her installations to the extent that, hanging in quiet museums, they seem to crackle with her residual wit. But post-conceptualism thankfully allows for the cohabitation of pleasure and rigor. In any case, this interpretive approach seems necessary if I am to reconstruct a few of the impulses that could have driven Lucía to prepare such a remarkably gentle experience for an audience of critical thinkers.

The murky bottom and sea spray just outside the Palacete's windows seem to have structured Lucía's response to the expansiveness of the gallery space. The few materials she has chosen to work with are strikingly light in color and/or weight. In fact they seem lighter than white: her glass is sandblasted translucent. And viewers would have to strain their eyes to trace the contour of the cotton balls with which she will blanket the great stretch of floor. Spotlights are the third essential medium. Almost the same color and texture as the surrounding air, Lucía's media seem barely to exist, just enough to magnetize the emptiness that visitors will take in as breath and subject matter.

Sandblasted glass, cotton-ball fuzz, blinding spotlights, slightly dusty sunbeams, and the sea spray outside. This multifold blurriness will be sublime. According to Jean-François Lyotard, “the sublime” refers to our inability, in language and thinking, to represent the infinite capacities of our own imagination or instinct. The sublime is a concept that can only be felt. But the sublime tends not to dull reason; rather it elicits more acute attention. The exhibition *Solo tu sombra* heightens the senses. Its undeniable sensuality bespeaks Lucía’s corporeal intelligence; meanwhile, the installation will barely repress her bubbling passion for critical theory—in the form of art history, comparative philosophy, and contemporary fiction (White Teeth).

For nearly a decade, Lucía has been investigating the philosophical problem of boundaries, both physical and imaginary. She contributes sculptural proposals to that discourse from studios in her native Buenos Aires and adopted New York. The artist is best known for making translucent and porous boundaries in the form of webs, veils, knots, and room-sized labyrinths. Lucía produces her own, unique medium by drawing long, loopy, rhizomatic lines —intermittently script-like, even legible at points— in hot glue on a nonstick surface. Once cool, she peels off these filaments into ribbons or bolts. Although the resulting fabric may appear fragile, it is actually a remarkably sturdy medium that she has hung, rolled, and otherwise manipulated into dozens of three-dimensional compositions. For *Solo tu sombra*, Lucía has ventured beyond those ongoing experiments with her hallmark medium. While this project certainly bears a family resemblance to the balance of her oeuvre to date, “ésta es una pieza muy silenciosa,” according to the artist. “Es un silencio que crea un vacío y este vacío es el que incomoda y nos obliga a movernos. ... Debemos romper con este silencio. Esta condición segura, certeza del silencio, donde no hay opción posible, nos lleva a un parálisis.”

From the Palacete’s cupola ceiling, Lucía will hang human-scale rectangles of sandblasted glass. Suspended at a forty-five degree angle to the floor, the lowest edge of each piece of glass will hang horizontally at about thigh level. Baring in mind her interest in the idea of boundaries, the profile of each glass rectangle may recall the slash mark ( / ) that denotes “or” and is used in binary oppositions like black/white, right/wrong, or mind/body. The slash keeps the two supposed antonyms in each of these pairings apart—physically (as ink on the page) and symbolically. “/” represents the so-called Cartesian

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<sup>1</sup> *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)

divide, named after René Descartes, the seventeenth-century philosopher who established this now dominant either/or mindset. Today we all unconsciously structure daily comparisons with binary oppositions. Thence come hierarchies. The slash may seem harmless enough on paper, but when it conditions our actions, the “/” mentality can kill.

The sharp, slash-like edges of glass in *Solo tu sombra* could actually cut a viewer’s skin; likewise, they can be seen to embody the culture wars as played out constantly in linguistics. Tragically, history shows how hierarchies that inform social interactions gradually ossified into various forms of institutionalized oppression, including sexism, classism, homophobia and ageism; that persist to a greater or lesser extent to this day. But the macro-political problem is that the mind/body hierarchy was projected onto a North/South geo-political hierarchy—Europe above Africa, US above Latin America—that correlates to racial hierarchy. That is, imperialist cartographers drew our map so it is encoded with colonialist ideology. The top of the world map is implicitly associated with the top of the body (the mind) and the bottom with sex and excretion.

Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, however, a transnational army of intellectuals (including conceptual and post-conceptual artists like Lucía) aiming to level social and political playing fields have questioned the Cartesian divide—not only its ethics, but also its usefulness. Just how separate are the mind and body anyway? Neurobiologists do not know; they still have not been able to solve the mystery of what happens within the synaptic cleft, between thought and deed. The contemporary philosophers and co-authors Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari proposed a whole new outlook by suggesting an elementary yet revolutionary tactic: to substitute the word “or” with “and.”<sup>2</sup>

The fuzziness of boundaries in *Solo tu sombra* suggests Lucía’s determination to destabilize oppressive structures. “Las gradaciones entre la oscuridad y la luz,” says the artist, “es lo que crea un espacio liberador.” In her work, form is content, just as the sublime is an intellectual experience that can only be felt. Lucía cross-contaminates phenomenology and politics. The artist sips from both minimalism (associated with form and the body) and conceptualism (associated with content and the mind), collapsing these two legacies of the 1960s. Thus she defies authoritarian art historians who insist those movements are

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<sup>2</sup> “Preface” *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987)

irreconcilably.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, she stands on the shoulders of the Argentinean avant-garde of the 1940s and the Brazilian Neo-concrete movement of the 1960s, whose members (including Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica) articulated radical philosophy and politics through their spin on the monochrome tradition. In *Solo tu sombra*, viewers who reunite mind and body will physically understand the content in form. That is corporeal intelligence.

Audience members will meander around *Solo tu sombra* barefoot. Lucía collapsed the respectful distance that viewers conventionally maintain from art. It will be an intensely physical experience—a guilty pleasure, a delightful insubordination—that participants will live as much as contemplate. Thus Lucía blurs the traditional active-artist/passive-public dialectic. In an anti-didactic way, she aims to train visitors to overthrow all sorts of spiritual tyranny. Whereas the traditional museum apparatus bestows value on objects, Lucía assigns value to action, activism.

Lucía Warck-Meister wants visitors to collaborate in the artistic process by throwing their shadows onto the glass rectangles. *Solo tu sombra* kinesthetically encourages viewers to find their light, that is, to position their bodies in the spotlights that are fixed on the sandblasted glass pieces from above. They will be rewarded by feeling warm light on their backs and seeing the illusion of their bodies expanding up the inclined plane. The installation promotes imaginary weightlessness. It may even evoke a sense of transcendence.

“Transcendence,” to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, “has to be understood as derivative of immanence.”

An example might be that theologians and philosophers like themselves win authority by hypothesizing in terms of biology or physics. That is now. For most of the history of humanity, faith has shaped common sense and science alike. Before the drastic secularization of human experience that defined the Enlightenment in the late 1700s, people surely would have considered this statement anti-intuitive. But today in general, particularly for the intelligentsia, religion is taboo. Few would question Deleuze and Guattari’s value judgment now. Although some professors may be motivated occasionally by a desire for

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<sup>3</sup> The author is referring to a 2001 conversation with Benjamin Buchloh regarding Gordon Matta Clark, in which the professor insisted that minimalism and conceptualism are irreconcilably distinct. His opinion may be indicative of the slant of the *October* group.

transcendence, they could not say so in lecture halls without a rationalization, like the apology in the following Italo Calvino quotation.

Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, however, artists and critics involved in post-conceptual discourse seem to be dusting off metaphysics for reappraisal. So admitting that *Solo tu sombra* causes transcendence-like delight should not provoke a scandal. After all, any transcendence here is literally derived from this plane of immanence: all Lucía's materials are readily available at pharmacies and hardware stores.

Now for the sake of argument, let's force the following bizarre analogy: if transcendence is derivative of immanence, could we say shadows are derivative of mirrors? Sure. But we could not always have answered in the affirmative. People must have observed themselves in shadows long before the invention of mirrors in the 1200s. But despite chronology, today most people, if pressed, probably would have to acknowledge they consider shadows to be derivative of mirrors. Mirrors are powerful.

Jacques Lacan, a twentieth-century philosopher interested in psychoanalysis, developed a concept called "the mirror stage," an accelerated stage of early childhood development.<sup>5</sup> Lacan explains how babies looking in the mirror begin to recognize themselves as physical beings. Infants' vision is more advanced than their motor skills, so they see they can't move as well as their parents. Ensuing frustration impels them to reconcile their physical and psychological lives. Struggling to unify mind and body, infants feel a kind of negative pleasure that is analogous to what scholars experience while trying to imagine life beyond Cartesianism.

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<sup>4</sup> "Lightness" *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage International, 1993)

<sup>5</sup> "Of the Gaze" *The Four Fundamental Concepts* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978)

During the mirror stage, the baby sees the reflection of her entire body and thus reconciles mind and the whole body. But by adulthood, social conditioning has shrunken her physical self down to just the face. Most mirrors are sized and installed to show just the face. A woman applies makeup to just her face. A man shaves just his face.

This line of thinking brings us to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "faciality."<sup>6</sup> The so called overencoding machine—the collective powers-that-be, including the mass media, that anonymously delineate and police the global status quo—programs our subconscious to see a face in everything that does not clearly look like something else. We tend to make out a face in any blank surface (like a wall) or anything ambiguous looking (like a cloud). Any stain, scratch, or doorknob could resemble an eye, a nose, or a mouth. It is as if we were hardwired to see the face everywhere, as if that image were emblazoned on our corneas. Thus we constantly reinforce our self-image as a disembodied face.<sup>7</sup>

Now if the face is privileged because we associate it more with the mind than with the body, we widen the Cartesian divide. So perhaps we could remedy this social ailment by downgrading the face's value in relation to the rest of the body, until we assign equal value per square inch to the entire body, including the face. As an exercise, we could trash mirrors and contemplate ourselves in shadows—sans facial details. Visitors to *Solo tu sombra* will perform this symbolic act.

That said, now we can interpret Lucía's installation as a philosophical and political proposal—the experimental exercise of freedom.<sup>8</sup> What kind of freedom? Freedom from faciality. *Solo tu sombra* also offers illusory freedom from gravity, the sensation of hovering between the less-than-solid cotton-ball floor and the cupola ceiling. And the artist not only provides a liberating experience for her audience, but she frees herself from geographic determinism, as well. The exhibition will release viewers from the meta-narrative about Latin American art: Lucía's understated intellectualism helps dispel the tired, old misconception that Latin American artists naturally produce exotic, erotic, revolutionary expressionism. Moreover, *Solo tu sombra* will be a playground for corporeal intelligence. The installation will beckon viewers

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<sup>6</sup> "Year Zero: Faciality" *A Thousand Plateaus*

<sup>7</sup> This floating-head phenomenon is more prevalent in cold climates than in warm, where people use more of their bodies to communicate in public interactions.

to move from spotlight to spotlight as if dancing choreography of their own spontaneous design. That mentality of freedom in a public realm, regardless of its fleeting nature, may well persist in visitors' attitudes long after driving away from the Palacete.

Lucía offers us a taste of transcendence without leaving the plane of immanence. No smoke and mirrors; her process is transparent. Yet the immanence from which she derived this imaginary transcendence does not detract from the validity of the viewers' experience of freedom. To the contrary, freeing oneself from academic hierarchies—e.g. the freedom to treat Piet Mondrian's life-long love of nightclub dancing as rigorously as his passion for geometry—is itself intellectual practice, the glory of post-conceptual art.

Amy Rosenblum Martín

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<sup>8</sup> "The experimental exercise of freedom" is a concept developed by Mário Pedrosa, the Brazilian critic who also coined the term "postmodern art" in reference to Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica in the 1960s.