

TRANSFORMATION: BECOMING AWARE

The work of Víctor Grippo (Junín, 1936 - Buenos Aires, 2002) unfolded in the highly charged political climate of Buenos Aires in the seventies, an exciting time of intellectual ferment in which culture emerged on the streets. In such an atmosphere of a popular search for knowledge, the possibility of creating new thoughts, of re-signifying the objects that Grippo (a trained chemist) presented opened up a new path in the field of art.

In 1970 Grippo presented his work *Analogía I* (Analogy I) at the exhibition entitled *Arte de sistemas* held at the Museo de Arte Moderno of Buenos Aires (MAMBA). His intention was to transcend the ordinariness of a familiar object, the potato, measuring the energy it produced by means of a wooden grid holding forty potatoes arranged in cells, each of which is equipped with a zinc and a copper electrode. Using a voltmeter, viewers were able to measure the electric energy generated (0.7 volts each potato).

The choice of a humble foodstuff like the potato that becomes an image of mental energy by analogy is not gratuitous. Grippo uses it to make a

case for the value of his country and its cultural construction, and as a consecration of basic modest everyday objects.

In this way Grippo's work covers a trajectory from the major arts to the basis of society. His gaze is vertical, moving from the plant energy to the energy of human creativity, from the visible to the invisible, inviting communication with the secret ins and outs of certain commonplace objects.

Grippo believes in labour as the force that constitutes man, the key to attaining his chief objective: man's transformation through the exercise of a trade. The five basic trades in society appear connected in the work entitled *Algunos oficios* (Some Trades, 1976): the blacksmith, the carpenter, the stonemason, the farmer and the bricklayer.

The paradigmatic work of this specific connection with labour is *Construcción de un horno popular para hacer pan* (Construction of a popular oven for baking bread), an installation in the framework of the group show *Arte e ideología: CAYC al aire libre*.¹ censored by the police. In contrast with the sense of disapproval and of urgency that characterised many of the installations by other artists in the square, by building an oven Grippo was working in another register, where what prevailed was a will to restore and preserve community values. By setting up a central space of exchange, he 'established a precarious community that lasted as long as it took to make and eat the bread. ... A quiet, transitory community shaped by an unwilling and unwitting commitment to a commonplace practice, summoned by a gratuitous action that was offered as a gift.'²



Víctor Grippo. *Transformación*, exhibition view, CGAC, 2013. Photo: Paco Rocha



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Grippo reproduced a country gesture in the city, and as a result the masses turned up to eat as an aesthetic and ritual act. The idea was to 'socialise not only the bread, but the technique, knowledge and memory as well.' Contrarily, the work *Valijita del panadero [Homenaje a Marcel Duchamp]* (The Baker's Valise [Homage to Marcel Duchamp], 1977) contained a piece of bread burnt by excessive heat. Once again, the disappointment caused by social and political defeat, the response to the ideal suggestion of sharing included in *Construcción de un horno popular para hacer pan*, dissipated here by acts of political violence that took place that same year.

Grippo was against the notion that fragments human activity of men, which he understood as a process with varying degrees of responsibility and therefore considered specialisation to be irrelevant. His works in the series entitled *Valijitas* (Small Valises), such as those dedicated to Le Corbusier, Kafka, The Builder and The Sagacious Critic, created a sort of equivalence between different 'trades.' Grippo turned again to objects as bearers of messages in which the human figure was implicit. Starting from each experiment, each new discovery was translated into an empirical plastic result, isolated by the artist with scientific neatness and preserved as a sign of the present to be launched into the time ahead, thereby providing a way of 'understanding the world' as an ecological and moral reserve for future generations. Such formulations reveal that ethics and aesthetics were priority issues for an artist unable to dissociate art from life.

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Grippo's mechanisms are never sophisticated or costly. His solutions to technical problems are handmade, not industrial, in response to the lack of resources or replacements from the First World—a technology of poverty. In keeping with the process of dematerialisation of the artistic avant-garde, in the mid-sixties Grippo began working with (almost) perishable materials in ephemeral installations.³ Grippo included time as matter in his works using the potato as a natural perishable element that generates energy and transforms as it rots.

In *La papa dora la papa, la conciencia ilumina la conciencia* (The Potato Browns the Potato, Awareness Enlightens Awareness, 1978) Grippo re-established the equation between art, science and metaphysics: 'I wrote that art, science and metaphysics should constitute a single search.'⁴ Science stands as a product halfway between the sacred and art, beyond the formal consideration of the image.

Vida, muerte y resurrección (Life, Death and Resurrection, 1980) develops this meaning. On this occasion Grippo resorted to five basic geometrical shapes (sphere, pyramid, cube, cylinder and cone) duplicated in lead, into which he introduced a natural element—moistened beans that germinated and exploded, breaking the lead, while opposite them their pairs seemed to witness the action. For the artist, the resulting phenomenon was the antithesis of the symbol of death, of the firmness that stands for the lead and for life—the seed, the germination that makes the shape explode. In *La comida del artista [Puerta amplia - Mesa estrecha]* (The Artist's Meal [Wide Door - Narrow Table], 1991) an entire meaning unfolds around the table and

the threshold, the chairs and the foodstuffs, their function denied, giving way to symbols—burnt corn, golden egg, dry aubergines—and insinuating the practice of geophagy in those regions of the world where poverty forces man to cook earth and eat it. The meaning suggests the idea of death, sacrifice, human and divine food—the cosmogony attributed by Grippo to artists.

The plumb line first appears in *Opuestos [Opuestos-Contacto-Unión]* (Opposites [Opposites-Contact-Union], 1981), a work that marked the beginning of a long series the artist explored over the rest of his life dedicated to *Equilibrios* (Equilibria) that comprised a hitherto unknown selection of drawings on paper. These are also the first works in which the human face appears as a mask, another symbol in a system of interconnected analogies and oppositions. Grippo's oeuvre unfolds in a totally coherent natural process, in segments of meaning that suggest fragility, violence, simplicity and precariousness.

If the artist's task was to decipher hidden meanings beneath primitive objects, in *Analogía IV* (Analogy IV, 1972) he idolised the potato yet again, ritualising at once its humility and humble people. The table reveals the tension of a tablecloth divided up into two symmetrical halves, one of them made of modest white canvas, and the other of sumptuous black velvet, on top of which Grippo arranged two place settings and two dishes of potatoes, one of them real and the other made of transparent resin. Horacio Safons wrote about this work in 1972, 'Grippo's work is complete and operates from an ideological viewpoint. His *Analogía* is perfect in formal terms, but in addition provides a completely open terrain in which to "analogically" make a connection with everyday realities.

The confrontation is perfectly legible: nature-manufacture or aliment-consumption, positive-negative or language-metalanguage, can all be pairs of a motivated conceptual construction whose elements are surprisingly austere.¹⁵

In *Tabla* (Board, 1978) the table is integrated in the discourse as a receptacle of memory, revealing its experience in the inscription 'On this work surface, the cousin of countless other man-made work surfaces, a place for reflection and labour, the bread was divided ...' As in *Valijitas*, the signifier 'table' transports meaning and projects an explicit social and political dimension, as we read on one of the inscriptions in *Mesas de trabajo y reflexión* (Tables of Work and Reflection) presented by Lilian Llanes at the 5th edition of the Havana Biennial in 1994, and subsequently shown in Kassel at *Documenta 11* in 2002: 'If society doesn't hope to make each human being a trustworthy individual and each individual an artist, it repudiates the species and disowns man.'¹⁶

Invited by the Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVA) in the framework of St Ives International, Grippo participated in *A Quality of Light* with the work *La intimidad de la luz en St. Ives* (The Intimacy of Light in St. Ives, 1977), a site-specific installation pervaded by silence and concentration that engaged in a dialogue with the quality of the light. The artist arranged a humble set of work surfaces. In the case of *Mesa del albañil* (Bricklayer's Table) the set is more an analogy of reality, an antithesis. The silence of Grippo's oeuvre suggests a timeless, contemplative aesthetic space characterised by a suspended calmness in which the order and distance between bodies in the same semantic field draw it towards metaphysical art.



Victor Grippo. *Transformación*, exhibition view, CGAC, 2013. Photo: Paco Rocha



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The 1989 works entitled *Cercando la luz* (In Search of Light) and *Juego de niños* (Child's Play), plaster models of sculptural urban spaces, are pervaded by light. These apocalyptic visions of a disappearing world, comments on the notion of progress, coexist with a visionary hope, anticipating a world in which 'action and contemplation will be one peaceful act which accompanies Nature in her unity.'⁷ In *Anónimos* (Anonymous, 1998-2001) the human figure is invoked again, as it was in *Construcción de un horno popular para hacer pan*, but this silent and transitory community isn't partaking of anything—it is shapeless, devoid of expression and almost of life; despite consisting of human groups, they do not communicate with one another. These art works coexist in Grippo's oeuvre with other more hermetic pieces such as those made in 2001, *Árbol* (Tree) and *Sutil* (Subtle), where immateriality and lightness are prominent.

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Ancient alchemists used the term *unus mundi* to refer to the mystery that considered the root of each being a state of union with the ultimate unity of the Whole. Grippo addresses man's political, social, cultural, ordinary and emotional space. Given that in colloquial Spanish, the human heart is known as *la patata*, the potato, it is impossible not to establish an analogy and say that beyond all historiographical classifications, Víctor Grippo's work is a tool designed to transform man's very core: his individual and collective conscience.

Grippo believes in the continuous transformation of human actions through the renewal of habits, and his work intends to convey these possibilities: 'The "renewal of symbols" will lead to a "renewal of

methods".'⁸ 'Mankind further approaches greater knowledge all the time. The problem lies in its application, in its instrumentalization. The problem is that there is so little ethical development.'⁹ As the artist himself concluded: 'For me, what is important is transformation,' and regarding the perception of his work, 'It is up to the viewer to establish more effective arrangements following his own good judgement.'

Excerpt from the text by Alicia Chillida to be published in the exhibition catalogue.

- 1 We should also mention the construction of a bread oven in Barcelona's Raval district, in the framework of the exhibition entitled *Antagonismes. Casos d'estudi* staged by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in 2001.
- 2 Andrea Giunta, 'Víctor Grippo: poderes de lo precario,' in Carlos Basualdo et al., *Eztetyka del sueño: versiones del sur*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2001, p. 99.
- 3 Ana Longoni, op. cit., p. 18.
- 4 Víctor Grippo, 'Art is above all a circumstance,' in Marcelo Pacheco et al., op. cit., p. 313.
- 5 Horacio Safons, quoted by Víctor Grippo in 'Art is, above all, a circumstance,' in Marcelo Pacheco et al., op. cit., p. 314.
- 6 See Marcelo Pacheco et al., op. cit., p. 133 (fig. 4).
- 7 Víctor Grippo, 'Cercando la luz,' [1989], in Marcelo Pacheco et al., op. cit., p. 118.
- 8 Víctor Grippo, 'A la "Renovación de los símbolos"...' [12/09/1999], in Marcelo Pacheco et al., op. cit., p. 212.
- 9 Víctor Grippo interviewed by Jorge di Paola, 'Víctor Grippo: Change Habits, Modify Consciousness,' [1982], in Marcelo Pacheco et al., op. cit., p. 323.