

## **From the Sublime to the Contemplative. *Form and Emptiness* by Fernando Varela.**

When writing this text, I found myself with conflicting ideas as to how to approach it, a conflict which ended with the realisation that the most honest way to deal with it was to share the actual experience of interacting with the piece. To experience this is what some theoreticians call “the experience of Art” or “experiencing the piece or work”. And of course, the encounter with the piece did not occur in any other way. Concerning the work of Fernando Varela, it is not the first time that this happens to us, as this was already experienced in this very Museum of Modern Art in 2005 when Varela exhibited “The Silenced Word” (“*La palabra callada*”), a group of canvasses in which, at establishing an intimate relation with them, we discovered a scattered alphabet in all the overflowing surfaces of an overwhelming and total silence, the silence of plenitude. We had no other choice, in that first moment, but to look, feel and keep quiet.

What we are dealing with concerning the Art of Varela is what we know of his voyage in search of his inner self, a spiritual quest which began in his early childhood. We have seen concrete evidence in his series of paintings: *Orígenes* (Origins) and *Formas primarias* (primary Forms) and the above mentioned *La palabra callada* (The Silenced Word). In *Orígenes* and *Formas primarias* we are faced with that which is multiple, symbolic, asymmetric, rational, all expressing his profound convictions about life and those transcending aspects that justify the human existence exhibited in its essential form, with authority albeit in perfect harmony. If years ago, *La palabra callada* reduced us to silence, the ensemble presented to us in *Orígenes y Formas primarias* encourages us to scrutiny, something which Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006) called “The abstract sublime” in reference to those feelings and emotions transmitted by the works of Still, Rothko and Pollock.

In this occasion and personally, Varela invites us to share something which was revealed to him through innocence: a shape which after detaching itself from a material surface leaves a vacuum equal to that surface. What he formulated previously is presented to us in a model or a study for a collage which later will convert itself in the installation entitled *Forma y Vacío* and which will form part of his proposal in *Orígenes y Formas primarias* exhibited in the Modern Art Museum of Santo Domingo. In the conversation the questions arise, but perhaps they cannot be answered: What is the meaning of this revelation? How is *Forma y Vacío* related to his other pieces, as from its materiality it seems different from the group exhibited in *Orígenes y Formas primarias*? In the first instance, this was the challenge to decipher, an intellectual exercise which became a way of life.

During a first approach, simple, the said piece is an installation, but also a huge collage of formal and chromatic austerity, made up of ovoid shapes cut out from a white substance laid on a rectangular surface of the same substance, but black. Before recognising it, appear images of shapes seen before in his canvasses and these ratify the correspondence, the constancy and coherence of the artist: to express with images the reflections and results of his interior quest. This result, which appears in paintings, drawings, objects and now collages, has absorbed all this discourse and formal elements obvious in his other works: the duality, the antagonism, the primary forms, the monochromatic as well as the paradoxical as a powerful element of reflection.

The piece invites one to contemplation, that state of conscience at rest, to be in its presence and leave it to rest as is its essence. In a first moment this is perhaps being form and vacuum at the same time. However, as we have already mentioned, antagonism is present in the works of Varela and in *Forma y Vacío* conceptual, formal and perceptive contraries cohabit.

Thus, it is true that elevated truths may surface in contemplation, subtle revelations through a profound connection with the piece, and on the contrary, that which does not reveal itself easily to us incites us to search in its components, examine and decipher them, confronting the artist's

intention with the elements (symbols) of his work in an introspective process towards the centre of the piece and its property, and from there, return to silence, to the contemplative.

The philosophical and at times mystical reflection, according to the words of the artist, determines the formal and conceptual characteristics of his works. His quest is interior and manifests itself in his physical being as well as in his artistic being, a quest which does not avoid to cover all aspects be they of the spiritual or the material order, be it the origin of life conceived as the germination of this mystery of the first original, ovoid form; recognizable in "Origins" and "Symbols", elements of the grammar with which Varela moves his pieces.

In *Forma y vacío*, the space in which the composition evolves bring us to a surface of great rectangular format, albeit not perfect just like the forms and vacuums which rest in it. If we consider the rectangle as a shape, we find in it that space where the human being feels comfortable and safe; it is one of the shapes most frequent in the design and construction of his daily objects and habitable spaces: houses, beds, tables, all are constructed on the rectangular shape.

In the rectangle, the ovoid shapes emerge, leaving a vacuum equal to theirs. They suggest the multiple connotations associated to what is the initial, the created or the existent. The egg, an image which repeats itself through cultures and Time, is the symbol of that which is potential, that which germinates. According to the alchemists, the egg holds both matter and thought, visible and invisible form of life. It is also a cosmic symbol referring to the earthly sphere. The ovoid shapes, in *Forma y Vacío*, displayed in three entities, lead us to a spiritual synthesis. The presence of the three resolve the conflict arising from what is dual, a reaction of the action upon the two, and expresses sufficiently the poise of the unit in its interior. The fact that the rectangle is placed as a vertical axe indicates a superior stage of life.

In the entity, white and black interact in their two implications. Firstly, as tension between "colours" and secondly as elements symbolising opposites. The contrast between both allow the (white) shapes to stand out against the background (black), the line created to separate them is revealed by contrast with the black which remains calm, serene and mute. In it, the shapes interact in a subtle way, producing a vibration which imprints a slight movement, hardly perceptible. This movement changes into energy which converts our rectangular space into the space of the possible. There, a transformation may take place. And maybe it is the representation of the spiritual movement which Varela spoke to us about when he pointed out, when referring to the appearance of the primary shapes, that the action of energy onto a point affects the shape by modifying it, allowing other possible shapes to emerge; an action which can repeat itself from eternity to eternity.

Having scrutinized the shapes or forms, we are left with the vacuum. "A form which has free itself from a material surface leaves a vacuum equal to that form", this is in reality the big question of this work. A question which Zen Buddhism defined and which we find formulated in the Sutra of the Heart: "The form is vacuum and the vacuum is form; the form does not differ from the vacuum, the vacuum does not differ from the form; whatever is form is vacuum, whatever is vacuum is form". In spiritual terms, without entering into the depths of the Sutra, both in the piece of Varela and in the Sutra of the Heart, there is no conflict between the two (form and vacuum). In both cases, unity prevails and they are one and the same.

Form and vacuum are the Absolute. It is a state of full consciousness which cannot be intellectualised but which is lived, felt, a state in which the human being can live and at the same time receive exterior manifestations (forms) exactly how they present themselves. We should not

confuse this vacuum with nothingness, with absence because in this case the containing and contained essence is plethoric and could be considered as an elevated state of spiritual life where duality and contradictions, the ego, prejudices and the intellect disappear. These truths, together with the positioning of the rectangle in a vertical axe, confirm the representation, in the piece, of a superior stage of life and conscience. Always helped for the paradox of this reflection, we understand that Form and Vacuum make up a space of gestation and a space of plenitude. Its communicative activity takes up from the sublime to the contemplative, by sublime meaning that which moves us and the contemplative as that state of absolute rest. In Form and Vacuum, the spiritual reaches material consistency.

It is possible that in a space so saturated with images and objects, stuck to the material and the tangible, such as the space of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is, it seems contradictory that an artist would want to express through what is visible, a state of consciousness and a spiritual world invisible yet which exists. If this is the case, we should not forget this primary spirit of abstract Art to which Fernando Varela identifies, both in his conceptual and formal basis. Although he sees Art as an instrument of spiritual expression, he also succeeds through that expression to draw attention to itself, to its materiality as well as to the signified. As Arthur Danto points it: Abstract Art pointed out to totally new spaces, an observation still true today because those spiritual spaces of the human being keep being virgin, new, in the face of the overwhelming wave of communication spaces loaded with messages. The work of art generates a type of communication opposed to what we experience today and which, more than communicate, *induces us to*, and in this case brings us to our initial point of departure: contemplation.

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