

## Messing up abstraction

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Since the late 1980s Mexico City has been the base for an active and independent artistic community, a mixture of Mexican and foreign artists, critics and curators. It is not a group, though there are groups among it, nor can it be identified with any one particular viewpoint or practice. Several of the artists have well-established reputations on the international circuit. Paradoxically, while the City itself, its vast and varied urbanism, is predominantly the source and theme of these artists' work, they have fully shaken off the cultural nationalism and the weight of tradition that dominated art in post revolutionary Mexico. Their immediate reaction was against the Neo-Mexican revival of the 70s and 80s, which even if often ironic in tone still seemed to reinforce the old stereotypes and was easily institutionalised. If for the foreign artists the encounter with Mexico produced a powerful response it was not to the ancient or picturesque but to an urban situation outside their European experience. The conditions of life in Mexico City were a constant challenge but also a kind of explosive liberation. For Melanie Smith this has been a fundamental motor to her work: mixing up abstraction, as she put it, in response to new surroundings where "aesthetic ornamentation seems irrelevant when compared to the question of daily survival."

In 1989 Melanie went to Mexico for six months and is still there. Recently out of art school in England, she had no particular reason for choosing Mexico – the intention was just to work outside Europe for a while. Shortly after she arrived she was included in the first exhibition in Mexico to feature installations: *A propósito*, curated by Guillermo Santamarina with Gabriel Orozco and Flavia González, at the Museum of the ex-Convento de los Leones, a former Carmelite monastery in a forest on the outskirts of Mexico City. The exhibition, a kind of homage to Joseph Beuys, was an open-ended group of projects which interacted with the architectural and natural environment. Smith at the time was making small wooden boxes by hand, using found materials, and her installation consisted of wood and wax objects. "The piece was in a room that had no roof, and so the wax parts were exposed to the sun and melted into a pool of wax that hardened at night": very Beuys, as she says.

Informality and experiment, questing and critical practices aware of minimal and conceptual art but not dependent on them, and a great diversity of materials and mediums characterise the work of this loose community of artists. Smith's work has engaged directly with the City and especially those aspects of the life of the giant but oddly intimate megalopolis that differentiate it from European cities. Her responses to the street, the markets and the day to day working environment are in dialogue with that of other members of the artistic community but have a distinctive character. One unusual feature of her working practice in this context is that she paints, and painting is a constant reference in unexpected and original ways. Another is the focus on labour and the intensive effort of producing any work which, as in *Six Steps towards reality*, she makes apparent in the final video installation. Her videos/films, made in collaboration with her partner Rafael Ortega, who shot them, realise completely and effectively the possibilities of this medium, in that they are not records of an action or performance but are in themselves that action.

The links between an early group of works, *Orange Lush*, and the video *Tianguis 2* are very interesting and pertinent to her relationship to abstract and minimal art. They concern not just the take on colour as a form of structuring a confusingly abundant and multifarious environment – one might mention as precedents, though not as influences, works like Boris Mikhailov's *The Red Scene* (1968-75), a series of snapshots of urban scenes in which red objects predominate, or Richard Hamilton's beach photographs – but the diverse ways in which, in both, the body is referenced. Neither *Orange Lush* nor *Tianguis 2* claim the phenomenological concerns of minimalism, or at least not in the sense of the 'bodily encounter of the spectator and the work'. Bruce Nauman dubbed paintings 'lush' and Smith might be countering this denunciation of drunken over-abundance of surface in the *Orange Lush* series. The name wonderfully conveys the feeling of fleshy excess in the draped and puffy orange plastic objects filched from the street and fixed to wooden boards or accumulated in boxes. In *Orange Lush 1* the plastic tubes, fabrics, wires, pouches, bags,

brush and balls have an ambivalent relation to the body: potential coverings, or constraints, or sexual symbols. In *Tianguis 2* the camera slowly perambulates one of the many street markets, its coloured plastic sheetings surrounding the empty stalls – orange, yellow, pink, blue – breathing slightly against the sound track of a heart beat.

The first impression in *Tianguis 2* is of an entropic emptiness, the stalls void of the colourful mass of merchandise or visible human presence. At the same time this allows the split screen of the video to bring out the geometry of the structures, the sheets of coloured plastic, circular cans, rectangular tables and wire grids. But the sounds are crucial – the indistinct hubbub of the market traders, a siren, and the register of a heart beat, that slows to a deathly pip at the end of the video. The insistent sound of the invisible body, which seems both part of the camera movement and inherent in its object, invades the slightly pulsing plastic cubicles. These are so abstracted that they begin to evoke blood-coloured cells, alternately drained of colour as the split-screen switches from colour to black and white, the city as a living creature which is simultaneously contradicted by the vacant scene. The fragile, temporary market shelters perch among the streets of solid two-storey modernist houses, ephemeral as people.

Perhaps it is just one of those instances of objective chance that proliferate in a place like Mexico City, but it seems wholly in spirit that the only legible sign is that on a white building in the street behind the market stalls: “*Clinica – medica- quirurgica*”, which becomes a fleeting but uncanny accomplice to the heart beat, a reminder of actual bodies monitored and suffering. (Perhaps the orange of *Orange Lush* recalls the orange marguerites that adorn graves on the Day of the Dead.) In terms of messing up or mixing up abstraction this is a kind of post-phenomenological, “corrupted minimalism”.

Abstract art, ready-made, the moving image and installation are combined in *Six steps to abstraction* whose collage-like incongruity is buried under the bland term “multi-media assemblage”. A series of paintings are stacked against rather than neatly hung on the wall, much as I had seen them in her studio in Mexico, partially obscuring one another; the vertical stripes of beautifully modulated colour across their surfaces having no particular beginning or ending or scale. Television monitors are casually floored or parked on their own cardboard containers. Suspended from the ceiling is a tangled mass of pink plastic threads which visually resembled a pot of pink paint flung at the ceiling and physically a muddled skein. The ends trailing loosely above the paintings seemed an affront to their clean bands of colour, in upright stripes. The (lack of) correspondence went both ways: the pink threads might be originary to the canvases, like a jumbled skein drawn into order, or alternatively contaminating the paintings so that what at first appeared carefully regimented surfaces began to disintegrate like a television screen suffering interference. One of the television monitors showed men apparently setting up just such a three-dimensional arrangement of coloured threads in a room-space; another monitor showed a typical workshop of the kind characteristic of Mexico City, crowded with tools, open to the street, a small-scale industrial immediacy long-lost to London. Melanie described the *SLG* project as a “melting pot of other works that had been trying to reinterpret and mix up abstraction”.

The formless pink plastic tangle recalled a short text by Georges Bataille, one of the “critical dictionary” entries from his magazine *Documents*, on the word “*informe*”, or formlessness. This term, Bataille suggests, affronts philosophers who need to be able to categorise, to name and thus give form to the things in the world. It is a term that serves to declassify and what it designates has no rights and “gets crushed like a spider or a worm.” “*Informe*” is part of Bataille’s attack on the philosophical certainties and linguistic hierarchies that assert order, but it was also written at a moment when abstraction, or non-objective art, was no longer being seen as in absolute opposition to figuration but was opening up to a world of ambiguities, of potencies, fantasies and metamorphoses. This latter aspect of “*Informe*” touches Smith’s work in that the formlessness of the pink thread is like a collapse of the geometrical and other orders that once governed abstraction.

In 2003 Smith and her partner Rafael Ortega made the video *Spiral City*, a highly personal response to a city they were about to leave and at the same time to Robert Smithson’s earthwork and related film, *Spiral Jetty*. Whereas the

film of *Spiral Jetty* follows the movement of the artist along the inturning spiral, Smith's film plays off the counterpoint of the city grid against the upward movement of the helicopter flying in widening spirals. It was shot all in one take, and the movement of the camera produces as it turns a cartwheel effect on the urban grid, with perpendicular streets becoming diagonal on the screen, but the initial perspectival effect evaporates as the camera draws away from the endless and undifferentiated grid formations. If the grid as a form is potentially open, always exceeding its own boundaries, the spiral curve has basically two formations: the equable spiral and the equiangular or logarithmic spiral. In both cases the curve starts from a point of origin and its curvature diminishes as it recedes from that point into infinity. However, it is possible to imagine moving in the opposite direction, into rather than outwards from the spiral. This is the entropic movement in *Spiral Jetty*, in which the artist is filmed running inwards to the starting point of the spiral, as the camera rises away from him, (and parodied in Damien Ortega's "Hágalo usted mismo: *Spiral Jetty* 1993", a miniature version of the earthwork with a toy car at the end of the jetty). Smith's *Spiral Jetty* resembles the spiral target/shield Alfred Jarry drew on the belly of his monstrous anti-hero Ubu, and on the entropic spiral Smithson quotes Samuel Beckett: "I must have got embroiled in a kind of inverted spiral, I mean one the coils of which, instead of widening more and more, grew narrower and narrower and finally, given the kind of space in which I was supposed to evolve, would come to an end for lack of room." In Melanie Smith's film the movement is in the opposite direction, with the camera in flight upwards in a widening spiral movement. Although the film ends in a dazzle of light like *Spiral Jetty* this has none of the grandiose cosmic references of Smithson's film. There is rather a continuous contradiction between the metaphysical invitation of the ever-widening logarithmic spiral and the paradoxical insistent enclosure of the grid.

Even from a great height and even as its configurations dissolve in the light there is no end to this city; this is saturated urbanism, drained of colour, no monuments, no green spaces, no river. The starting point was Ixtapalapa, a very poor, satellite city of endless identical streets of low-rise houses. Smith called it "apocalyptic city" but it resembles not at all those "cities on the move" of the Far East, whose gigantic skyscrapers with rift valleys of streets virtually realise what used to be called the 'futuristic' 1960s fantasies of Archigram. It is the megalopolis in the abstract, and the video functions like the dramatic close-ups so dear to photographers of the 1920s, in bringing to the surface of the image patterns and abstractions normally invisible to the naked eye.

*Spiral City* is not based on construction-heavy interventions in the landscape or the studio nor does it feature the artist herself – her personal/impersonal trace is the spiral flight recorded in the film, the material the urban landscape of a totally non-European city. It is as unlike the European capitals from the air as it is on the ground. Mexico City is an awe-inspiring gigantic urban spread filling its volcano-fringed valley, on a scale far surpassing any European City. It is for the European visitor a mass of vivid but half-legible signs, compounded of a deep history (for example, the vast Zocalo, not this size from modernist aspirations but left over from the mightier central plaza of the Azteca) and serial rushes of modernisation, an ongoing confrontation between capitalist expansion and socio-cultural conditions of huge complexity.

There is nothing sentimental about Smith's pursuit of the modern spectacle in Mexico, the massed aerobics classes, the curiously staged photographs of sado-masochistic scenes in *Farce* and *Artifice*, dances, the crowded workshops on the streets. No reference to history and the weight of the past. This is modernity of a shattered, intimate, kind, already old, past its sell by date, but always still to happen. While it would not be true to say that the UK has entirely lost its local traditions, artisanal production, inventive popular forms of culture outside the mass media, they are rare and need the eye of a Jeremy Deller to bring into focus. In Mexico the markets and small workshops teeming in the streets immediately behind the gigantic highways produce a quite different relationship between the globalised economy and the make-do and mend world, practical or fantastic, of the ordinary citizen.

In thinking of Smith's responses to modern Mexico largely in terms of the disruptions to aesthetic purities of one kind or another, I found that among the numerous initiatives in abstract art that could be brought in, it was the Russian constructivist and productivist artists with their utopian projects who insistently came to mind. Not simply as polar

opposites to a dystopian modernity but because their attempt to re-fashion life in terms of an ideal abstract language, which conflated the object and pure forms, is as it were seen through strange mirrors which reverse the movement. This is not to suggest that Smith is in search of pure forms but that there is a dialectic between form and the stuff of the street that is subtly embedded in the diversity of her mediums.

This somewhat far-fetched comparison with the rigorously impersonal constructivists does not, however, allow for the question of the person of the artist herself. In the movement between intimacy and objectivity in much of her work, there is rarely a reference to her identity. *Parres 2* came as a complete surprise because it is, apparently, a self-portrait. Like *Parres 1*, it is shot in the semi-urban terrain vague of *Parres*, a sub-industrial settlement visible from the highway between Mexico City and Cuernavaca. At the top of the high volcanic ridge that separates the polluted city from the flowering and temperate valley to the south, the road divides, one route leading to Cuernavaca, the other to Tepoztlan, a community with strong indigenous roots. Tepoztlan is now home to many artists including Smith and her partner Rafael Ortega and was successful in a famous battle to retain its autonomy and prevent, among other things, its water being diverted to nourish a Cuernavaca golf course. In these dramas *Parres* is forgotten, a no-place of no interest to the thousands who make the mountain crossing every day.

In the film/video Smith stands alone in a rough yard, facing the camera, which gradually draws back from a close-up of her face, away from her immobile figure while dogs and passers run to shelter from the tropical downpour, eventually so intense that it almost obliterates her, the intensity of the water operating like the spray-paint in *Parres 1* which finally whites out the camera lens. Whether her face is wet with tears or just the rain is impossible to say. The film lasts 3'42", just the length of the song on the sound track, which startlingly evokes a quite different world. It is a rural complaint, performed it seems by a female English country singer though the protagonist is a young Irish servant clapped in jail for daring to aspire to the hand of the daughter of his employer. "When I was young and in my prime..." : the poignancy of this displaced song, with a displaced protagonist of the wrong gender, in a distant setting is virtually indistinguishable from the irony of its context. What I took at first for a self-portrait (literally as the subject of the film, then culturally referenced with an Anglo-Irish song) became a moving, ambiguous and even hilarious play with cultural and political identities.