

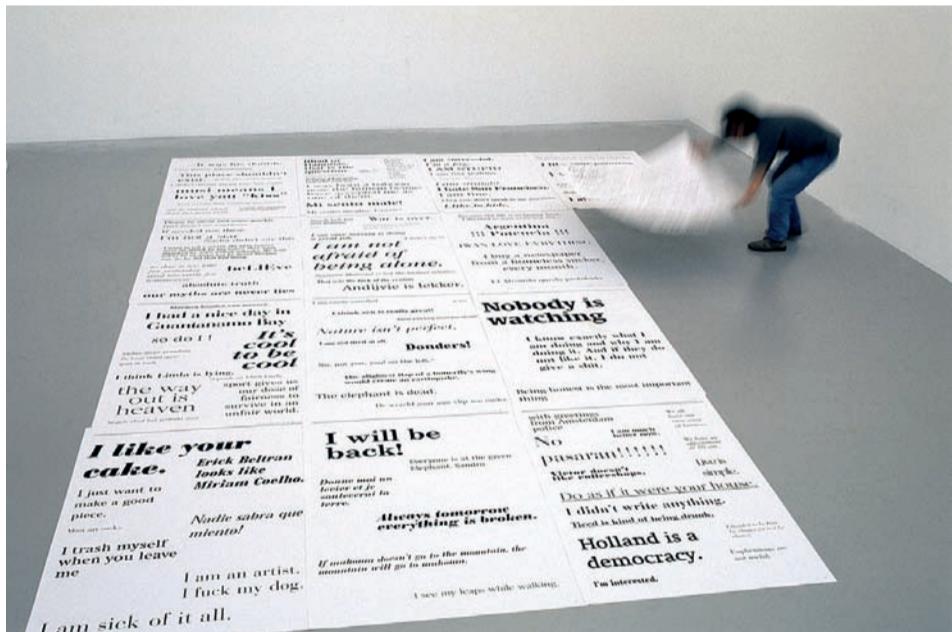
Some Fundamental Postulates

Erick Beltrán

interviewed by Max Andrews

The attempt to create the terms that make up a dictionary of multiplicity is an ethical action the Mexican artist undertakes through a radical idea of subjectivity.

Il tentativo di creare i termini che compongono un dizionario della molteplicità è un'azione etica che l'artista messicano mette in atto tramite un'idea radicale di soggettività.



From top-left, clockwise:

- *Perikhórein Knot*, 2011, installation view, La Sucrière, Lyon, as part of "A Terrible Beauty is Born," 11th Biennale de Lyon. Courtesy: the artist
- "Declaración de guerra contra el mundo: Postulados fundamentales," installation view, LABOR, México City, 2011. Courtesy: LABOR, México City
- *Menzogna (Mentira / Lie)*, 2004, view of the intervention in the streets of Lucca, Italy. Courtesy: LABOR, México City
- *Efecto Rashomon*, 2008-2009. Courtesy: LABOR, México City
- *Nothing but the truth*, 2003. Courtesy: LABOR, México City

Max Andrews In terms of your interest in the encyclopaedia and micro-history, could each of your projects be like a single page of a book?

Erick Beltrán My work is about how to organise things, how to show the inner structures of something. It is not exactly a matter of sequential pages in a book, but more like three-dimensional layers through which you can jump really fast from place to place. It is transversal research in a Warburgian way – there is a way of connecting things that is not “beginning, middle, end”, but is more like “1, 7, 4, 8, 24...”. I attempt to reorganise and feel my way through a discourse as a space rather than a linear path on a surface.

MA And hence Perikhórein Knot, your work for the 2011 Lyon Biennal, goes beyond an editing or printing process which you have used before, into a third dimension...

EB Yes. It's a wooden globe that needs an audience in order to turn itself into a recognisable icon: the heavy load of Atlas. While spinning it you turn into Atlas, part of the world as an image. You can read the diagram on the outside of the sphere, and enter inside it. I'm interested in cohabitation theory, and philosophies concerned with spheres as places you inhabit. The globe tattoo is a diagram that attempts to divide the world along four axes: people who move, people who don't move, objects that move, and objects that don't move. I think these are the main political divisions in the world today. If you are able to move things you have political power, you are privileged. If you can't move yourself, you are part of “the masses”. If we think in such terms we can easily explain, for example, why we cannot get away from a colonial mentality. I'm trying to imply that the thing we call “object” is not really an object, it's more about the surplus value it has acquired through these processes of movement, and that's political power.

For example Coltan [columbite–tantalite] is a material used in electronic devices – computers, cell phones, and so on – a basic material of microcircuits. It's moved from Congo into laptops and communication devices. And then you have a maximum surplus, and most of it becomes technological garbage within a few years, which then is dumped in the very same place the Coltan was taken from. So you have a complete circle, where a whole set of things are happening: how do you steal an object from a place? What are the consequences of the mining for conflict in Congo?

MA Would you describe your practice as political?

EB It's politics in the sense that I think politics is about trying to give value and meaning to things and actions. A key question on this subject is how we define the “unit” in our relationship with the universe. The unit has been colonised by the self in Occidental thought, and therefore the notion of scale is almost nonexistent. This huge event created capitalism and the organisation of society as we know it. “Declaration of War Against the World: Fundamental Postulates”, my exhibition at LABOR, was an attempt to address that. The dominant discourse says that

all units of measurement must refer to the “self”: whenever you think about scale it is about “you”. Of course this is a fallacy, and I try to exchange these terms for multiplicity, to regain the possibility of seeing things on different scales.

MA To attempt a kind of multiplicity dictionary, a Theory of Everything?

EB Yes, and I feel it is a possible and useful thing to try to do. Creating certain terminology is one of the most ethical things you can do – new concepts that re-establish one's sense of relations, cohabitutions and methodologies. I have an advantage over science, in that I don't have to follow a bureaucratic and academic system. I can be more daring and I can make mistakes. I'm trying to prove what I think is the most radical idea, that the self is fiction, that there is no “me” – it's just a discursive technique.

MA Do you consider language and images as your primary concern, rather than form?

EB Yes, but some linguists say that images only exist on behalf of language, and I don't believe that. My investigations on synesthesia and the phantom limb have led me to believe that there is something irreducible about the image. With synesthesia, what can it mean to say that something represents something else, without a meaning?! And the phantom limb – where you have an image independent of its own reference – what the hell is that? The brain always seems to want reason, and that's a problem as it also creates a lot of fantasies. You can see this with optical illusions: the brain can't understand them so it bends reality in a certain way. That gap between the brain and the universe is what I'm interested in. There are two ways of thinking about this: reading the universe or acting upon it. If I have to choose, I believe that everything is written, everything is already there, but we have to understand it, to read it.

MA Who do you think has come closest in such a pursuit?

EB That's difficult to answer, but there are some people who were heading in the right direction. Ramon Llull is for me one of the key figures. Or another example: Robert Filliou. In terms of trying to define things in politics: Öyvind Fahlström.

MA What role does truth have? You've made an encyclopaedia of lies [Nothing but the truth, 2003], and an encyclopaedia based on personal theories [The World Explained, 2008]...

EB Truth is something that is expendable because there is no need for “I”, it's more a need for mechanisms, movements, organisation, rules and so on. That's why my work is about multiplicity, I need lots of things, many examples, and I try to be as detailed as possible. In the end, truth is just a system that manages to control a territory for a certain period of time.

MA Was there a particular point in your work as an artist when you realised this?

EB Absolutely. In 1997 I was asked to define my work in ten lines, and I realised it was impossible. So I said to myself, okay, let's just make it one word! So that word was “edition” and from there everything expanded and exploded, as I realised my work was about the question of how you select things – what is a choice? And that is a really difficult question.

Max Andrews Per quanto riguarda il tuo interesse per l'encyclopedia e la micro-storia, ciascuno dei tuoi progetti potrebbe essere paragonabile alla singola pagina di un libro?

Erick Beltrán Il mio lavoro riguarda il modo di organizzare le cose, il modo in cui mostrare le strutture interne di qualcosa. Non è esattamente una questione di pagine sequenziali in un libro, ma piuttosto di strati tridimensionali attraverso i quali puoi saltare molto velocemente da un posto all'altro. È una ricerca trasversale in senso warburghiano – c'è un modo di connettere le cose che non è "inizio, metà, fine", ma piuttosto "1, 7, 4, 8, 24...". Tento di organizzare e riconoscere la mia strada attraverso un discorso come se fosse uno spazio piuttosto che un sentiero lineare su una superficie.

MA E da qui Perikhórein Knot, il tuo lavoro per la Biennale di Lione del 2011, oltrepassa quel processo di revisione o stampa che hai usato in precedenza, per svolgersi in una terza dimensione...

EB Sì. È un globo di legno che ha bisogno di un pubblico per trasformarsi in un'icona riconoscibile: il pesante carico di Atlante. Mentre lo fai ruotare, ti trasformi in Atlante, parte del mondo come immagine. Puoi leggere il diagramma sulla parte esterna della sfera, ed entrare al suo interno. M'interessa la teoria della convivenza, e le filosofie che s'interessano alle sfere come luoghi abitabili. Il tatuaggio del globo è un diagramma che tenta di dividere il mondo lungo quattro assi: persone che si spostano, persone che non si spostano, oggetti che si spostano, e oggetti che non si spostano. Credo che queste siano le principali divisioni politiche del mondo attuale. Se hai la possibilità di muovere le cose, possiedi potere politico, sei un privilegiato. Se non puoi spostarti, sei parte delle "masse". Se la pensi in questo modo possiamo spiegare facilmente, per esempio il motivo per cui non possiamo allontanarci da una mentalità coloniale. Sto cercando di dimostrare che la cosa che chiamiamo "oggetto" non è veramente un oggetto, ma riguarda piuttosto l'eccedenza di valore che ha acquisito attraverso questi processi di spostamento, e tutto ciò è potere politico. Per esempio il Coltan [columbite-tantalite] è un materiale usato negli apparecchi elettronici – computer, cellulari, e così via –, è un materiale di base dei micro circuiti. Dal Congo – da dove è estratto – arriva fin nei computer portatili e negli apparecchi di comunicazione. E quindi ottieni il massimo surplus, dopodiché la maggior parte di tutto ciò diviene spazzatura tecnologica nel giro di pochi anni, che poi viene scaricata proprio nello stesso posto da cui il Coltan è stato prelevato. Così ottieni la chiusura del cerchio, dove ha luogo un'intera serie di cose: come rubi un oggetto da un luogo? Quali sono le conseguenze dell'estrazione sul conflitto in Congo?

MA Descriveresti la tua pratica come politica?

EB È politica nel senso che credo che la politica riguardi il tentativo di dare valore e significato a cose e ad azioni. Una domanda chiave su quest'argomento è come definiamo "l'unità" all'interno della nostra relazione con l'universo. L'unità è stata colonizzata dall'ego nel pensiero occidentale e quindi la

nozione di proporzione è quasi inesistente. Questo gigantesco evento ha creato il capitalismo e l'organizzazione della società come la conosciamo. "Declaration of War Against the World: Fundamental Postulates", la mia mostra da LABOR, era un tentativo di affrontare questo punto. Il discorso dominante dice che tutte le unità di misura devono riferirsi all'"ego": ogni volta che pensi alla scala, si tratta di qualcosa che riguarda "te". Ovviamente questo è un errore e io provo a scambiare questi termini con la molteplicità e a riguadagnare la possibilità di vedere le cose in proporzioni differenti.

MA Per tentare di comporre un certo dizionario della molteplicità, una Teoria del Tutto?

EB Sì, e sento che questa è una cosa che è possibile e anche utile tentare. Creare una certa terminologia è una delle azioni maggiormente etiche da mettere in atto – nuovi concetti che ristabiliscano il nostro senso delle relazioni, convivenze e metodologie. Ho un vantaggio sulla scienza, in quanto non devo seguire un sistema burocratico e accademico. Posso essere più audace e posso commettere errori. Sto cercando di provare ciò che credo essere l'idea più radicale, che l'ego è finzione, che non c'è un "me" – si tratta solo di una tecnica discorsiva.

MA Consideri il linguaggio e le immagini, piuttosto che la forma, i tuoi interessi primari?

EB Sì, ma alcuni linguisti dicono che le immagini esistono solo per conto del linguaggio, ma non ci credo. Le mie investigazioni sulla sinestesia e sull'arto fantasma mi hanno condotto a credere che ci sia qualcosa d'irriducibile nell'immagine. Con la sinestesia, che cosa può significare che qualcosa rappresenta qualcos'altro, senza un significato?! E l'arto fantasma – dove hai un'immagine indipendente dal proprio referente – di che accidenti si tratta? Il cervello sembra sempre desiderare la ragione, e questo è un problema dal momento che crea anche un mucchio di fantasie. Puoi vederlo con le illusioni ottiche: il cervello non può comprenderle così piega la realtà in una certa direzione. La distanza tra il cervello e l'universo è ciò che m'interessa. Ci sono due modi di pensare a questo: leggere l'universo o agire secondo i suoi dettami. Se dovessi scegliere, credo che ogni cosa sia scritta, ogni cosa sia già lì, ma dobbiamo comprenderla, leggerla.

MA Chi credi sia andato più vicino a quest'obiettivo?

EB È difficile rispondere, ma ci sono stati alcuni che stavano andando nella giusta direzione. Ramon Llull è per me una delle figure chiave. Oppure un altro esempio: Robert Filliou. Nel senso di provare a definire le cose in politica: Öyvind Fahlström.

MA Che ruolo ha la verità? Hai creato un'encyclopedia di menzogne /Nothing but the truth, 2003/, e un'encyclopedia basata su teorie personali /The World Explained, 2008/...

EB La verità è qualcosa di sacrificabile, perché non c'è bisogno di un "io", piuttosto c'è bisogno di meccanismi, movimenti, organizzazioni, regole e così via. È il motivo per cui il mio lavoro riguarda la molteplicità, ho bi-

sogno di molte cose, molti esempi, e tento di essere il più possibile dettagliato. Alla fine, la verità è solo un sistema che tenta di controllare un territorio per un certo periodo di tempo.

MA C'è stato un particolare momento nel tuo lavoro artistico in cui hai capito tutto ciò?

EB Assolutamente. Nel 1997 mi fu chiesto di definire il mio lavoro in 10 righe, e capii che non era possibile. Così dissi a me stesso, va bene, facciamolo in una sola parola! Così quella parola fu "edizione" e da lì ogni cosa si è espansa ed è esplosa, dal momento in cui ho capito che il mio lavoro riguardava la questione di come si selezionano le cose – cos'è una scelta? E questa è davvero una domanda difficile.

ARTFORUM

APRIL 2009

INTERNATIONAL

BARCELONA

Erick Beltrán

GALERÍA JOAN PRATS

Erick Beltrán's "Serie Calculum" (Calclulum Series)—“an essay about the concentration, the density and the creation of value,” as he puts it in the gallery press release—is a curio collection, compiled by the artist between 2006 and 2008. Because it refers back to idiosyncratic and arbitrary findings, a *Wunderkammer* such as this is meant to produce amazing and surprising effects. And since its premise is one of subjective categorization, it is also a way of actively generating provisional theories about our classification of the world and our writing of history.

Apart from a few large maps and a slide show, all the works in Beltrán's series are small objects, semantic machines of a sort that develop narratives about the construction of value. One of the most striking is *Plusvalía* (Surplus Value), 2008, a diminutive die fabricated in Barcelona that, we discover, is actually made of human bone found in Colombia—perhaps belonging to a victim of guerillas, the mafia, or paramilitaries, one might speculate. A color photo shows the bone that is the origin of the die, and a text in two parts explains how a Colombian NGO is working on having the remains of unidentified people declared cultural heritage, and gives the definition of the word *player* while raising questions (in Spanish) such as “Can cheating become the game in itself?” and “How do you rig a die?” In spite of its unassuming appearance, the bone die belongs to a class of transgressive works that looks at us from the other side of death. The work is tiny but so laden with fateful significance that it seems impossible to roll. Yet its shock effect is complicated by its dissection of the logic of surplus value as a fatal game.

Other works also reflect Beltrán's life as an itinerant artist, each being a spin-off of a journey or a previous project. *Concentración* (Concentration), 2008, a photo of the artist's finger and a finger-shaped bar of Chinese ink from Beijing, refers to the myth of King Midas, but could also be read as the artist's implicit acknowledgment of his indexical powers. At the end of the gallery, three blackboards with flowcharts and diagrams traced semiotic spheres of exchange, alluding to an economy of collective objects of knowledge rather than a market governed by the fetishization of artistic intentionality.

The show's semantic busyness was something you had to take or leave. It was an excess of sources and references that were not meant to gel into a whole, and it further connected—among other things—rare New Zealand stamps, the French Situationists, iron branding in the Old West, Confucianism, and binary codes. Beltrán's condensed narratives make for a Benjaminian social history that shows how words and things are connected in images that are at the same time playful and political—that is, subject to historical incompleteness. “*Serie Calculum*” is not a Marxist take on history, then, because it clearly transgresses economic value and operates with a much more inclusive concept of production. Thus *Oráculo* (Oracle), 2008, presents nail clippings that ostensibly belonged to Rasputin, were “borrowed” by the artist from an exhibition in London, and are now displayed as a poor and appalling relic underneath the Russian monk's photo and farewell letter. Here, what is being allegorized—religious or mystical valorization—is almost overpowered by the indexical signifier, the physical remains of the infamous monk. When Beltrán leaves things open or opaque in this way, lack seeps in, absurdity overturns pathos, and reality collapses like a deck of cards.

—Lars Bang Larsen



Erick Beltrán,
Concentración
(Concentration)
(detail), 2008, mixed-
media installation.



Erick Beltrán.
Botín, 2008

La exposición *Serie Calculum*, del joven artista mexicano residente en Barcelona Erick Beltrán, puede considerarse una continuidad y a la vez una relativa variación respecto a otras propuestas suyas en torno a los vínculos entre gráfica pública y sus interacciones –o mediaciones– discursivas y de poder. De este modo, como se expone en la referencia misma de la muestra: "Serie Calculum es un ensayo entorno a la concentración, la densidad y la creación de valor en la sociedad contemporánea (...) Es una colección de piezas de pequeño formato que como indicios, señalan y condensan un problema social, político o económico, y al mismo tiempo se presentan como nodos de un entramado o circuito que revelan un sistema o un mecanismo de construcción del concepto o idea de 'valor'".

En ese sentido, creo que la exposición pudiera leerse no sólo como una reflexión sobre los contradictorios mecanismos de creación de "valor" en la economía y la sociedad contemporáneas, sino en el interior del sistema del arte del que participa el mismo artista. En este caso, que la muestra se halle expuesta en una galería del prestigio de Joan Prats, no es un dato secundario... Y que muchas de las piezas que se exhiben, directa o indirectamente exploran esos vínculos que representan sus sinuosos "valores" –contextuales, políticos,

culturales, simbólicos, pero también económicos– tampoco es un dato desecharable...

Esto se percibe cuando se detectan algunos de los nombres de las piezas de la muestra (*Intereses*, *Plusvalía*, *Botín*, *Especulación*, *Propiedad*), así como sus estrategias expositivas, donde objetos y fotografías se complementan o enfrentan en metafóricos contrapuntos irónicos o lúdicos, aunque a la vez recurriendo a la fetichización de esa objetualidad y visualidad mismas. En este caso, pensando que nunca podemos sustraernos de nuestros propios cuestionamientos discursivos, éticos e ideológicos, podría decirse que ambos –artista y galería– participan de los mismos dilemas abordados. Y tal vez por ello, creo que es importante rescatar los interrogantes que el propio artista (se) realiza con respecto a los temas que explora: "¿Cómo es que un objeto adquiere un valor especial frente a otro y este valor modifica otros objetos? ¿Cómo es que este valor implica una especulación y una plusvalía y esta maniobra para ser el significado y el objeto su significante? ¿Cómo es que la producción construye este valor y que el transporte de objetos y su reinserción modifican esta categorización de objetos? ¿Cómo se sistematiza una colección y cómo

se forma un conjunto de objetos? ¿Cómo seleccionamos cosas del mundo?".

Concebida como una suerte de *wunderkammern* (gabinete de curiosidades), en un múltiple recorrido por situaciones –y paradojas– que Beltrán detectó a partir de sus viajes por sitios tan diversos como China, Brasil, Corea, México, España o Colombia, la referencia etimológica del título de la exposición evidencia de alguna manera la relación entre *calculus* ("piedra" en latín) y *calculum*, que en este caso el artista asemeja a la idea de una "piedra en el zapato".

Y esto último, quizás, nos da ciertas claves de las aparentes pretensiones de Beltrán, al situar sus piezas a medio camino entre lo objetual y lo fotográfico; desplazándose de forma tensional entre lo visual y lo textual; y que culmina, a través de tres pizarras-objetos, en una compleja cartografía de términos que, a modo de "caosmosis" (tal como lo concibieron Deleuze y Guattari) mezcla en un entramado sin fin, conceptos, problemáticas, ideas, desde un posicionamiento sin brújula ante los dilemas –muy posiblemente irresolubles– que se derivan de jugar entre el objeto y el valor, entre el *calculus* del arte y el *calculum* de la economía...

Ernesto Calvo

ERICK BELTRÁN

BARCELONA
GALERÍA JOAN PRATS

PABLO G. POLITE

Es muy probable que por aquí haya quien todavía desconozca el trabajo de Erick Beltrán. Convertido en una de las figuras emergentes de la vanguardia latinoamericana, es un artista atípico y, sin embargo, de inmensa valía tal y como demuestra el ADN de su trayectoria gracias a sus principales señas de identidad: su actitud en alerta y casi siempre atinada en cuestiones político-sociales, su agudeza a la hora de crear y deconstruir discursos, su vinculación crítica con la Historia y su cultivo con iguales méritos de diversos géneros. De la gráfica convencional (la monografía, el libro de artista) a la intervención, pasando por la exhibición de objetos, mapas y diagramas, Beltrán viene corroborando desde hace tiempo que sabe sacar petróleo de archivos, museos y bibliotecas para dar entidad y lustre a un fin digno de elogio: analizar, diseccionar y cuestionar el poder que comunican los diferentes medios gráficos en su distribución de información y, en consecuencia, de conductas y valores.

Pocas piezas bastan para componer una muestra de interés. Así ocurre con la organizada por la Galería Joan Prats y que lleva por título *Serie Calculum. Calculum Series*: según el propio Beltrán, "un ensayo en torno a la concentración, la densidad y la creación de valor en la sociedad contemporánea", donde la crónica histórica y sus más sorprendentes curiosidades, las inquietudes del autor y un rastro de su recorrido biográfico se entremezclan con elasticidad suficiente para no desalojarse mutuamente, invitando al espectador a mirar más allá de lo que se exhibe. Nadie con dos dedos de frente puede echar por tierra ninguno de los trabajos que aquí se presentan. En todos, incluso en los más ligeros y divertidos, se percibe el afán de perfeccionismo y rigor de quien no deja nada a la improvisación o el azar. Valga como ejemplo *Oráculo*: el conjunto formado por un retrato de Rasputin, sus uñas reales casi fosilizadas y un texto escrito por él donde profetizó con exactitud el futuro del Zar de Rusia y su familia.

En lugar de contemplación pasiva, Beltrán estimula la reflexión activa. Y lo hace a través de una serie de dibujos, fotografías, mapas, objetos, recortes de periódicos, diagramas y textos extraídos de distintas fuentes para poner en relieve un problema social, político o

económico concreto que sirve como estrategia para definir, ampliar y descifrar con ojos renovados y nuevos niveles de lectura el concepto de "valor". De este modo, el autor subraya el *leitmotif* de toda su trayectoria que puede resumirse en un solo aforismo: toda información puede ser otra si se tiene una forma distinta de editarla y/o traducirla.



Intereses, 2008. Cortesía: Galería Joan Prats.

Beltrán conoce las reglas del juego y nos acaba mostrando una serie de realidades poco conocidas o directamente ignoradas a través de estrategias e indicios cargados de sugerencias.

Si recoger y ordenar el material ya supone un mérito considerable, dotarlo de significado a través de un proceso de sistematización o clasificación nuevo o insólito requiere capacidad, conocimiento, sacrificio y mucha imaginación. Probablemente el observador no se sorprenderá al principio. Pero, al final, seguro que no quedará al margen de su poderosa fuerza de convicción. Cada conjunto de piezas de la muestra enfoca la atención sobre sí misma pero también nos avisa de que hay algo detrás: que en realidad, ellas no son el mensaje, sino las mensajeras; no la solución del enigma, sino una puerta abierta a un universo reciclado, tentacular y prismático, oportunamente sistematizado a través de sus correspondientes diagramas. Una forma, al fin y al cabo, de observar el mundo desde nuevas perspectivas a nuestro alcance y, de paso, descubrir algunas historias sencillas que forman parte de la otra cara de la Historia.

The World Explained

Christel Vesters

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Published 27.06.2012



Erick Beltrán, *The World Explained*, 2008–2011, encyclopaedia and research project. Installation view, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Courtesy the artist and Tropenmuseum

Who were the first scientists? What is an android? How does plankton move? How does a lightning rod function? These are just a couple of examples from the long list of questions with which artist Erick Beltrán took to the streets of Amsterdam to lay the groundwork for the third edition of his ambitious project *The World Explained*.¹ Accompanied by a group of young anthropologists Beltrán set out to uncover the cultural patterns that determine the decisions and actions of the average Amsterdam citizen. Armed with a recording device and a questionnaire of over 800 questions, he and his team interviewed people on a wide array of topics covering areas as diverse as biogenetics, economics, physics, history and politics. Other questions required less specialised knowledge and could not be answered in a straightforward manner; in fact, they were the kind of questions to which all answers are equally valid and true, like: what determines our preferences? When do we speak of freedom? How are memories stored in the brain? Or: what is a feeling?

The multi-layered and long-term project *The World Explained* consists of three different stages: interviewing and collecting ‘testimonies and observations’; categorising these materials and editing them into

encyclopaedia entries, which are then illustrated, designed and printed in a live printing workshop; and, in the final stage of the project, detecting connections or parallels between the different entries to uncover the cultural patterns that lie underneath. Ultimately *The World Explained* results in a publication that, as its subtitle indicates, can be read as an 'INDEX OF PEOPLE'S CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD'.

Personal Theories

As Beltrán explains in the manual introducing the project, the objective of this anthropological-like pursuit is not so much to find right answers, or absolute truths, but rather to invite people to reveal their 'personal theories' with which they explain the surrounding world. According to Beltrán, in order to make sense of the context we live in, we navigate three different areas of knowledge: learnt knowledge, experience and the unknown. 'Personal theories emerge when we, confronted with a situation we cannot immediately explain, start making our own connections. We tie various reference points together in order to satisfy our need for things to make sense... People don't reveal their personal theories easily, but they can be provoked by asking them a set of questions that open up a field of tensions'.²

The concept of personal theories is the foundation of the intricate epistemological system that frames *The World Explained*. Beltrán uses his theory, which not only explains the production of everyday knowledge but also how personal interpretations make up social spheres and the belief systems of a social group, to establish the importance of 'unspecialised knowledge'. Using diagrams, epistemic knots and visualisations of thought in intersecting lines of thought and movements, Beltrán's assumptions mirror much of Gilles Deleuze's perspective on the nature of thinking – a system of differential relations that creates actual spaces, times and sensations, never absolute, always changing and defined through our confrontation with reality. Like Deleuze, Beltrán's theory abandons the idea of absolute knowledge; instead, it embraces the elements of chance and unpredictability.



Erick Beltrán, *El mundo explicado*, 2008–2011, encyclopaedia and research project. Installation view, MACBA's Study Centre, Barcelona.
Courtesy the artist

The World Explained developed and grew over time. After realising an edition of the encyclopaedia in São Paulo in 2008 and in Barcelona in 2009, in December of 2011 the first results of the Amsterdam volume were presented to the public at the Tropenmuseum, commissioner of the project. Introducing the work in the context of a museum like Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum, one of Europe's leading ethnographic museums – with permanent and temporary exhibitions dedicated to the display of (art) objects, photographs, music and film from non-Western cultures, in particular from former Dutch colonies – invariably puts the focus on how we study and produce knowledge about the other and how we represent this knowledge. Although adopting a methodology similar to traditional anthropological field research, *The World Explained* adds an interesting twist to the discussion by turning our gaze inwards.

The exhibition took the form of an information centre and live printing workshop. On the back wall of the space a sequence of diagrams, info-graphics and texts illustrated Beltrán's theory on unspecialised knowledge and the successive steps taken to produce the Amsterdam volume of the encyclopaedia. As such the diagrams and info graphics literally framed the activities taking place in the exhibition space: in one corner, refurnished as an office space, the team continued their interviews, whilst the other side was used as a printing room, with stacks of A3 paper and a mound of left-over wrapping material as silent witnesses of the ongoing production progress. To Beltrán, this live and on-site production of a body of knowledge – to which everyone can contribute – makes up the essence of *The World Explained*: 'The real project is the editing process, and making this process transparent. We invite people to contribute their theories, regardless of their expertise or education, but we also show them how knowledge is produced and we make them aware that it is possible to change its sources'.³

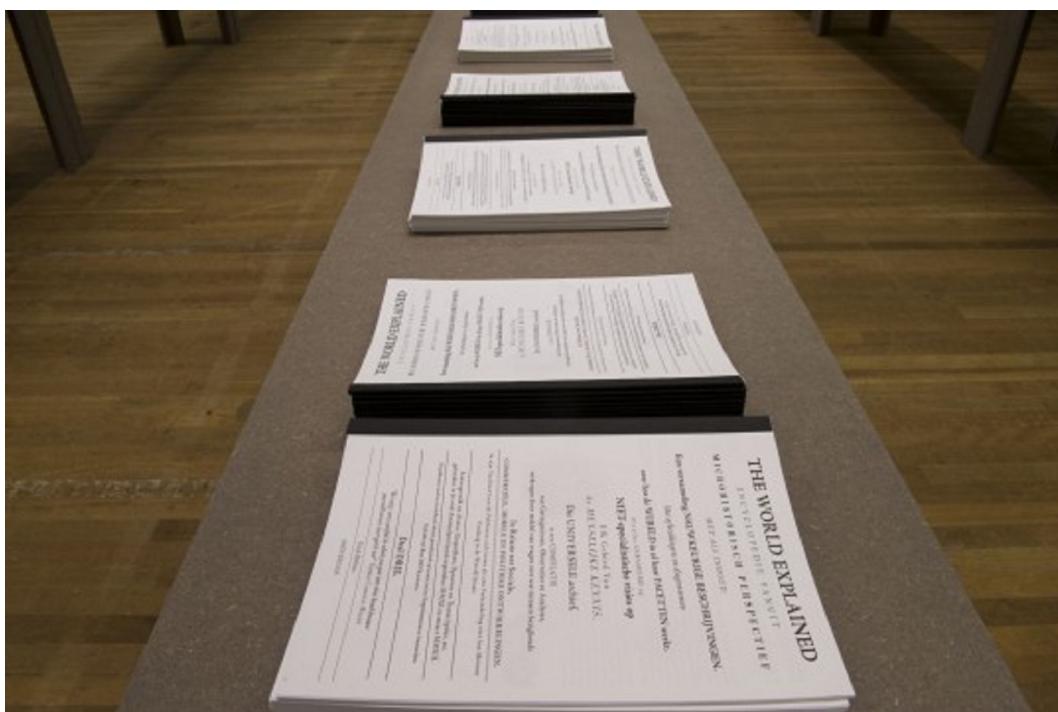
The infinite scope – and potential – of the encyclopaedia is further visualised through the growing number of pages distributed on a long table stretching out in the middle of the space, free for everyone to pick up and bind into their own encyclopaedia. 'Knowledge is power' to paraphrase Foucault once more.

Microhistorical Encyclopaedia

Although Beltrán appropriated the most authoritative and canonical format in which information is collected and disseminated,⁴ the encyclopaedia produced by Beltrán and his team does not resemble an official canon of

objective data or absolute knowledge. As its cover reads, the volume is a 'MICROHISTORICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA, CONTAINING: A COLLECTION OF PRECISE DESCRIPTIONS. WITH DETAILED PICTURES AND DIAGRAMS OF THE WORLD IN ALL ITS FACETS. ALL BASED ON AN UNSPECIALISED VIEW ON EVERY AREA OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE'. By adopting the 'microhistorical' perspective, the research and the encyclopaedia resist grand narratives and global pictures; rather its points of departure are the small events and personal stories and experiences of a time and place.

The pages in the encyclopaedia contain different texts, each based on a personal theory and categorised using a constellation of topics as disparate as 'Future / Machine / Perfection', 'Brain / Database / Ancestor', or 'Phase / Affinity / Shades'. Many of the explanations seem to escape any kind of linear, scientific logic, but in someone's private world they must make sense. However, the encyclopaedia is more than just a collection of separate, subjective views on the world. In the last phase of the project, another discursive layer is added to the texts, indicating the cultural patterns that may be detected through a close reading of the personal theories. By rearranging and highlighting different passages from the personal theories, adding typographic elements like circular forms, arrows and lines, Beltrán hints towards larger themes that may define the social reality of Amsterdam. In the Dutch volume more abstract matters like the notion of evil, the value placed on emotional lives or the balance between inner and outer lives – and which of those two determines our true selves – underlies the various points of view given in response to Beltrán's questions.



Erick Beltrán, *The World Explained*, 2008–2011, encyclopaedia and research project. Installation view, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Courtesy

the artist and Tropenmuseum

This summer all three volumes of the Encyclopaedia – São Paulo, Barcelona and Amsterdam – will be gathered in one publication. This collection presents the artist with the unique possibilities to compare the three different cities in terms of the cultural patterns discovered. In an additional English chapter, various connections and relations are suggested without any concrete (objective or scientific) conclusions being drawn. But some tentative conclusions point towards comparable themes: in both São Paulo and Amsterdam people talked about the mind as a computer, while in Amsterdam and Barcelona many theories indicated a sense of a ‘split subject’, and – maybe less surprisingly – in all three cities the topic of global economies echoes more than once.

Just as *The World Explained* sets out to uncover and document a portrait of the local Amsterdam community via their current understanding of the world, the project itself may also be understood as a product of its own zeitgeist. Beltrán’s interest in unspecialised knowledge and his efforts to establish their significance vis-à-vis formal and official places of knowledge production corresponds with the current interest in other epistemologies, be they represented via the figure of the amateur, indigenous or ‘primitive’ knowledge or other forms that exist outside of the dominant order of Western, scientific knowledge production.

However, while the majority of these debates departs from dualist, if not oppositional positions and the amateur is considered as undermining the primary position of the professional, *The World Explained* does not privilege one over the other. In fact, it is not Beltrán’s aim to establish a ‘counter-academy’, or to critique or question the hegemonic order of logocentric knowledge production. Rather, the project claims and establishes a legitimate ground for another, complementary form of knowledge – that of everyday life.

Footnotes

1. The first edition of the project, *O Mundo Explicado*, took place in São Paulo in 2008, on the occasion of the 28th Bienal de São Paulo. The second edition, *El Mundo Explicado*, was organised in Barcelona in 2009, on the invitation of MACBA as part of the exhibition ‘The Malady of Writing’[↑]
2. Erick Beltrán, from the manual for *The World Explained: Microhistorical Encyclopaedia*, pp.2–7[↑]
3. Interview with the artist, 12 April 2012[↑]
4. The design of the encyclopaedia is based on Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia, or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728), generally considered to be the first English encyclopaedia[↑]



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