Antonio Puri:
The art of making tangible some amongst the various forms of the undefined.

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After a first year in Bogotá, Antonio Puri, artist born in Chandigarh, India, and studied in the United States, decides to exhibit the work produced in this country in the facilities where it was made during that time period: in a space with long walls and a rather high ceiling located in the neighborhood *7 de Agosto* (commercial area focused on the sale of automotive parts, mechanical metal workshops, recycling warehouses and even popular bars and sex shops). The neighborhood is near San Felipe a district that, over the past five years, has become one of the places that conglomerates an effervescent circuit of art galleries, independent spaces and artist studios. While San Felipe has established itself as one of the most active cultural hubs of the city, some of the large spaces of the adjacent neighborhood (such as the one occupied by Puri, that some years ago was part of a former printing press) are slowly becoming inhabited by artist studios, that provide privileged spaces to produce and also, as in Puri's case, permit the display of his work.

What begins to come to mind are similar phenomena in other global cultural axes, like the huge artist studios in East Berlin at the beginning of the nineties, or the studios in Williamsburg, former industrial zone in Brooklyn, NY (never mind the distance). In effect, the work produced by Puri in this relatively short time could not have been shown in this ample manner, other than in a museum or an independent space of very generous dimensions.

But in comparison to San Felipe today, in *7 de Agosto* until now, there are only a small group of artists (about ten) who are initiating the pioneering process of opening a new circuit, in a zone with high levels of insecurity, having in mind production spaces in regards to what San Felipe had in the past five years with alternative or emergent institutions, quickly followed by shared studios.

If something can be approximated to Puri's character, without defining it, is his capacity to inhabit territories whose identity are in transformation, or even contribute with his preliminary exploration to its induced metamorphoses. Until now, he has been in a constant drift that has often broken his anchor, in a displacement, not only territorial but mental that nourishes his aesthetic proposal and constitutes, in a grand measure, his marrow (even if stating marrow here, might seem contradictory).

Even having been strongly influenced by North American culture, his origins from India that define a great part of his work, are found for the first time with a Latin American city, which has generated a strong impact. As an artist, he has been able to spur in the Colombian capital, his own connections with a sector with which he had not had any previous contact.

Certainly, the ties between Colombia and India do not appear to have been very strong ones. Beyond the strengthening of commercial relationships and investments over the past years between both countries, or the Sai Baba and Yoga establishments that multiply in some areas of the city. Or the emphasis which Puri highlights confirming not only that *panela,* entered Colombia in the XVI century through the Port of Cartagena, most probably coming from India

(and in fact, our country is the second world producer after the South Asian Republic, where the original name for *panela* is *gur* or *jaggery*). Another possible link is through one of the most renowned exponents of architecture and modern urbanism, Le Corbusier, who designed a plan for the city of Bogotá in 1947 when, during his visit during that year, insinuated in conferences that the city was being "poorly demolished" (we do not know if the following year, after the *Bogotazo*, he would have thought that was the proper way to do it). And a few years after presenting his project here, that was not realized, Le Corbusier develops in 1951 the urban plan of the native city of Puri, located in the northern part of India. It is not only the sole urban project realized by the architect himself, but it is also the city that concentrates the largest number of his works in the world (among public buildings and cultural institutions): yes, Chandigarh was the Bogotá dreamt by Le Corbusier. Today Bogotá has become a part of the imaginary of an individual who spent his first years between those *moles* with predominance of cement that prefigured progress at the time.

Nevertheless, what from my point of view constitutes the most relevant intellectual link is the production in the mid-nineties when, influenced by a group of Indian thinkers, about a decade before in regards to the Subaltern Studies Group (like Ranagit Guha, Gayatry Spivak, Dipesh Chakravarty, among others), a very distinct group of local intellectuals consolidate for Latin America a new way of reading Latin American culture and society that takes from there the name "postcolonial" coined before by those Indian thinkers (which some authors today have made into the decolonial perspective). It deals with an approach that damages the basis of an epistemological domination inherited from colonial mentality from which history and forms of knowledge have been constructed. In great part the social and emotional foundations of political and aesthetic imagination, as well as discourse and possible narratologies. The unequal relations of domination and subordination that articulated the supremacies of a new order that, nonetheless, reproduces schemes from the previous one, in the imposition of an arbitrary and homogenizing singularity (as a visible aspect of the main contradiction between the colonizer and the colonized): a fruitful dialogue from South to South.

Antonio Puri belongs to a time period that has these reflections as parameters that stake strongly for the nomadic, even if these have not converted either in dominant intellectual contexts. He embodies them in his own way through a gesture that based on a deep introspective component decides to also inhabit culture and produce discourses of enunciation in favor of the differential. His proposal belongs to a time period in which, after over half a century of contemporary art boom, can move amongst many mediums and even if a strong bond with painting exists (which could be a predominantly modern feature), there is in his work a way of approaching it that makes it hybrid, and permanently contaminates it with informalist or extra-pictorial aspects (in occasions with assimilations that takes it into the fields of installation or action art), as well as ways of making that do not allow for an easy classification of his work in that genre.

From the title chosen for this first exhibition in Bogotá, Puri presents himself as an iconoclast: "Un-Religare" is the negation (with the anglo prefix "un") of a Latin term, basis of the word "religion" that signifies "unite strongly" or "link together". In a certain way, it is a personal principle to expose himself, in his thoughts as much as biographically, in a series of works that more than locating him or making him belong (which simultaneously, would be a dominant way of designating and fixating the identity of the "other"), contribute to consolidating the fact of breaking oneself.

Nevertheless, even if this sounds like a double track, Puri's approach points in a first instance, to an indetermination that permits him not only to plunge into the undefined, but also erase

some constitutive traces of identity. It is a movement that winks to previous actions in which the artist restricts his movements by tying himself up with threads and cords that wrap around him, forcing him to connect with anchor points in the ceiling, skeins or giant balls, letting himself be handcuffed and then freed (as in the action presented in May of this year during his artist residency in Casa Tres Patios - C3P in Medellin, as part of his project “Attachment-Detachment”, where he is captured or pressed in a weave that is formed from a ball of jute which he then takes in his hands, while also being tangled up in thick cotton strands suspended from the ceiling, being immobilized and still in a space from which he is then liberated). For Puri the only way of finding oneself is by starting with the essential movement of first losing oneself.

What the artist rehearses in his studio in *7 de Agosto* through multiple pieces, large format paintings, installations, and objects, is some sort of delight in (and even a celebration of) the rupture. In a country where even language has become for him in a field of everyday exploration and a permanent act of translation-betrayal, this is a very good cover letter: even being a profoundly intimate work, subjective or personal, there is no emphasis in the I, but in the death of the I. Only in that condition of uprooting oneself is it possible to have a genuine encounter, and that is why Puri insists in erasing the concept, leave behind identity and even blur all context that can frame him in a single scenario or circumstance.

As if the weight of the origin makes difficult the way to the unknown destiny (or unexpected) that which strongly moves his will, as if he yearned to reunite with himself and at the same time with what is foreign within his inner self, in the manner that occurs in every individual or being. In the works that compose “Un-Religare”, Puri breaks symbolically (and others sometimes with extreme literality) with his city, with his father’s ominous weight, which for some represents in a consensus manner a form of authority or law. And even with his catholic upbringing: he acquires in India, khaddi artisan paper that have tears or flaws, in a store that at first are not offering the same for sale or are not available, and he paints on them surfaces that somehow imitate the visual texture of cement (bringing close the fragility of the paper to the solidity of a wall) in a polyptych entitled “Broken”. He also simulates an over-dimensioned tombstone with canvases on which he inscribes a phrase that invokes the memory of his father (whose acts can be considered as execrable and who thinks of himself as some sort of “god”), marking as the date of his death the same of his birthday, to symbolically erase him from his history, in the work entitled “Tomb”; meanwhile on the other side he places a group of bibles of different sizes one against the other, have been crimped to a piece, that a simple crank seems to be placed to turn over a grill like if they were meat, until becoming completely carbonized even when not dissolved (like an allusion not only to the burning of books or even torture, of inquisitions, both ancient and contemporary, that have perpetuated that specific faith in the world) in a piece entitled “Confession”.

The installation denominated “Black Tongue”, insinuates a very appropriate allegory of the indecipherable: it results in an kind of challenge or irony to think that, as in any practice of learning something it is also unlearning another thing, the image that one can produce as an author or capture as an observer, assumes the risk of ending up in the wrong side. “To penetrate in the level of the paintings is difficult” comments Puri, but here there is something more (and something less): what it deliberately hides in that gesture is precisely that which is shown. Composed of several small canvases that form a large grid, they show us the frames and the surfaces that normally hold the image in modern painting (abstract or figurative, here it no longer matters), and they appear strongly leaned against the wall by a sort of waterfall of canvases that could simulate the *cuña* that maintains them pressured against the wall as that tongue, alluded in the title, that falls making an arch against the ground.

For the critical eye that is very close to words (or the voice), silence also screams and a glance can becomes a descriptive act that assumes the possibility of mistake. What needs to be unbound here, the links that must be broken, even if delicately, are also those that rapidly direct us from looking to the description and from there to the label (or the stigmatization), as inherent risks in all affirmative claim of identity. And this idea is clearly learned from a postcolonial perspective.

Further along, in a series of photographs, Puri compresses and deforms the faces of several people, making them unrecognizable even to their dear ones. By rotating a cord around their heads, pressuring them, it could metaphorically tie them to a fixed space, real or symbolic (history, family, house, nation), this work is titled “Attachment - Detachment”. And almost in the middle of the room, he graphically builds a sort of arched bridge whose path seems to be made out of continuous walls that are frames with cloth which do not allow to cross, in the installation called “Prayer Redefined”.

As it occurs with a technique that repeats in many of his works, sometimes Puri makes a cord fall on top the canvas to mark, when retired after the surface has been painted, a sinuous line on the paintings (as can be seen in the polyptych “Journey” and “The Next Supper”). What is not so important here, even if it exists, are the beginning and final points, rather the random journey, the drawing that becomes a print without direction, but makes sense. Nonetheless, there are no loose ends: in great measure his proposal aims to redefine the subjectivity with a non-definition insistently requiring it to speak about avoiding the fixed form of identity and of the body, having present a constant self-reference (the body has been, in some of his pictorial series, the measure for his canvases: while the height was marked by the distance of his feet to his head, the width was the length of his outstretched arms perpendicular, making it so he could barely grab it with his fingers).

As in the game of tying and untying, or of getting lost in order to find oneself, emphasizing in the cracked links or completely interrupted it becomes a very useful strategy, in certain moments, consolidate something that Puri marks as one of the motivations for his work within his personal declaration as an artist: “I am interested in comparing the connections between my eastern roots and my western experiences”. Those connections can only be done once one has been willing to lose a few, while patiently acquiring others.

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