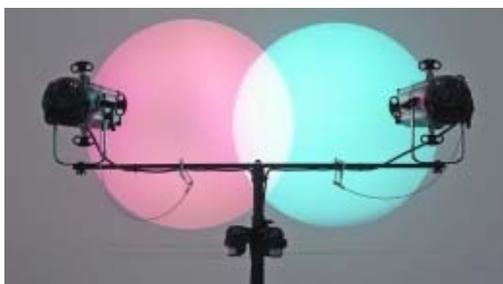


Art in America

Playing Telephone: An Interview with Amalia Pica

courtney fiske 04/12/13

Images associated with listening—cups pressed to the wall, a makeshift antenna, earplugs cast in metal—thread through the work of London-based, Argentinian-born artist Amalia Pica. It's an unusual preoccupation, particularly for an artist whose work extends the legacy of Conceptualism, which, at its most stringent, posited art as something purely ideational, unbound by the exigencies of shape and form. Strange too is Pica's invocation of listening as a visual rather than auditory experience: rarely does her art feature actual sound. The theme's fugue-like persistence in Pica's work undergirds its subtle revisions of Conceptual dogma. While '60s Conceptualists claimed authorship of the ideas that variously constituted or subtended their work—the idea was theirs, even if its execution fell to another—Pica limns the ways in which our thoughts are conditioned by the presence of others. Her art frames communication as an essential, albeit precarious act, filtered through semiotic systems that warp and muddle meaning, so that mutual understanding is never assured.



VIEW SLIDESHOW Amalia Pica: Venn diagrams (under the spotlight), 2011, slide projection and semaphore flags on pedestal, installation view, 54th Venice Biennale, 2011. Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros. Photo Kiki Triantafyllou, courtesy of the artist; Herald St, London; Galerie Diana Stigter, Amsterdam; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles.; Amalia Pica: Post-it Note, 2009-10, 11 13/16 x 8 1/4 inches, sunlight on paper. Collection of Andrea Succo, Milan. Photo Sander Tiedema, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Diana Stigter, Amsterdam.;



Pica's latest, self-titled show, which was at the MIT List Visual Art Center, in Cambridge, Mass., this spring and opens the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago on Apr. 27, surveys her past decade of work. In *Babble, Blabber, Chatter, Gibber, Jabber, Patter, Prattle, Rattle, Yammer, Yada yada yada* (2010), Pica appears in a sequence of slides, wielding semaphore flags in an unaffected pantomime that spells out its own title. *Venn Diagrams (under the spotlight)*, 2011,

consists of two colored circles of light cast from theater spotlights to form the eponymous graphic, banned by Argentinian dictators in the 1970s as an incendiary model of social collaboration. *Eavesdropper* (2011) enlists a performer to listen for hours on end through a glass glued to the wall. Such simple gestures, materials and conceits mark work that unfurls in complex formal and political constellations.

Pica spoke with *A.i.A.* by phone from her London apartment about her retrospective and the tessellated themes that inform it.

COURTNEY FISKE You grew up in Argentina, where you also attended art school. Which artists influenced you as young—well, younger—artist?

AMALIA PICA I didn't grow up with a heritage that said to be conceptual means not to think about the actuality of the world: the old Joseph Kosuth idea that art is strictly semiotic, that artists should create laboratory-like experiences to just understand the relationship that we have with language. My work has always been a bit dirtier and messier and bodily. People who were important to me early on were Victor Grippo, Cildo Meireles, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, among others. They were the first artists that I studied. Rauschenberg, Cage, Kosuth, LeWitt: they felt more exotic to me, and to a certain extent they still do. Now, of course, they're part of my heritage.

FISKE How did you come to the idea of listening?

PICA My interest in listening came from reading and thinking about storytelling. A storyteller tells a story, but only because someone else will

listen. Through the idea that thought happens in conversation, I arrived at an understanding of the listener as the figure who makes dialogue possible. I'm interested, more broadly, in language and exploring it visually. I'm drawn to the question of whether there is such a thing as visual language: visual signifiers, like the schema of a house, that might be read or understood in the same manner as words.

FISKE Listening interests me in light of the discourses that surround contemporary art. Theorizations and texts circle around the work and fold back into it, becoming part of it, in a sense. Perhaps the listener gestures toward these circulating conversations.

PICA What you're saying is very true. Conversation interests me as a form of language where enunciation is made apparent. It's not that you have something that you want to say and then you find a person and you say it. You think as you speak to this other person. That person is not just the receptacle of what you might want to say: they make it possible for that thought to exist. Often, that's what making art feels like. You have an idea, and the need to realize it physically pushes you to elaborate it. But you make an object only because you know that someone else will look at it. It's not as straightforward as sending a message and another person receiving it. The message is made through the process of sending it out.

FISKE Your answer reminds me of your "Sorry for the Metaphor" series [2005-11]: grids of photocopies which depict an isolated figure armed with a placard or a megaphone, issuing her message into a deserted landscape. It's a Romantic trope—the lone person, back turned to the picture plane, confronting nature's sublime expanse—but it's also a question of what art needs to be art, in the most basic sense. It needs another person.

PICA Right. In that particular series, the landscape signifies how romantic it is to think that someone will listen. It frames our desire to communicate as romantic. The moment when a rational person believes that there's a possibility of 100 percent understanding with someone else: that's where there's a hint of wishful thinking, which is the hint that interests me. It's almost like the call of the wild: the idea that we belong together and that we can empathize with one another completely. It's a fantasy, but we need it. We need to trust in the possibility of that sort of seamless, total empathy. I find no other way to be alive than to believe that could happen.

FISKE In your work, language rarely appears in its most literal form, as black-and-white text. Often, however, a work will be accompanied by a caption, which you write.

PICA I'm interested in the relationship between text and image: the things that you can say around an object and the object itself. Captions seemed like a very direct way to explore how text and image exist together. I'm also interested in education and how didactics shape our sense of the visual. For example, in *Venn diagrams (under the spotlight)*, the two circles of light are nothing but forms until the caption situates them historically, cluing you to their perception as subversive in the context of Argentinian dictatorship in the 1970s. I'm interested in the ideas that we project onto images and objects: how they resist as much as accommodate them. I think the caption is a big part of that, of the way that we strive to understand objects.

FISKE There's a certain anxiety surrounding contemporary art that the viewer be able to understand or "read" the artist's work. Do you ever push back against the expectation that your work should be legible?

PICA Weirdly, I do the opposite. I push as much as I can—I almost overreach—for people to understand, because that's not going to happen anyway. Words fail us all the time, but we still use them because we need to talk to one another. It's very important for me to try to be clear, even if I don't necessarily have a clear message to send. I don't intend to come across as obscure, but that happens regardless.

FISKE In light of this question of legibility, it's interesting that metaphors weave through much of your work. A good metaphor allows us to comprehend or visualize something that would otherwise be opaque.

PICA Exactly. Metaphors reflect our enormous desire to get a point across, to simplify and build up parallels. They interest me because of what cannot be spoken. Catachresis is a great example: it's a figure of speech used to describe an object that has no name—that, in a way, escapes language—by invoking something entirely unrelated. Hence, we get phrases like "leg of the chair" or "neck of the bottle" which attach human qualities to inanimate things. Objects have a space and a weight, a physical presence that eludes language. You can't speak an object: you have to speak around it. Metaphors are a way of doing that. In a sense, when we talk about the world, it's always in metaphors.

FISKE It's funny, writing about art produces a similar experience. Criticism translates visual objects into words, yet those words never map

exactly onto the object. There's always some slippage. That's why reviews come with pictures: as much as art is bound to language, it resists reduction to the same. This idea of translation as an imperfect or slippery process feels very present in your work.

PICA As an artist, you're forced to make compromises for things to be able to exist physically. Let's say you have an idea, and you want to make it in clay. If you attempt to make it too large, the clay will fall, and then you'll have to put a structure in it, which will change its shape. Later, you'll have to cast the sculpture because the inner structure will destroy it once the clay dries. You hold these insubstantial images in your mind before you begin a work, and, as you translate them into forms, part of them is always lost. The formal choices refract your original thought. It's like giving something amorphous a shape: it loses its indeterminacy; its possibilities narrow.

My first language is Spanish. It feels so familiar that it speaks for me, in a sense. But when I speak in English, I can't get lost in language so easily. The need to translate imparts a certain distance. I have to think of the idea behind what I'm trying to say, rather than just the words. Much of what I experience as translation in my work has to do with the clarity that comes from giving a specific form to loose thoughts and images. The process forces you to ask questions as silly and as important as "Why is it better in red, rather than blue?"; to make the idea concrete before it materializes. That's what translation adds: the possibility of questioning something before you put it out there.

FISKE Let's talk about the role of absurdity in your work. Several pieces take up semiotic systems that have become effete or absurd with time, such as semaphore and Morse code. Others, such as *Eavesdropper*, involve the performance of an absurd action.

PICA I think of absurdity as a call for complicity. Very often, it has to do with humor. If I tell a joke, you either laugh or you don't. If you laugh, it feels like there's a moment of complete understanding between us. Often this moment of empathy is clearer through absurdity than through rational discourse. Yet, absurdity also operates at a slight remove from humor. It's one step before the joke: it has everything the joke has, except there's no punch line for you to get. In that sense, absurdity is more open and less conditioned than humor. Which makes it a bit more useful.

FISKE Turning to formal concerns, you seem to be drawn to analog media and technologies: grainy photocopies, slide projectors or 16mm film. What attracts you to these older formats?

PICA I'm drawn to the physicality of things, which is why, very often, older technologies will be more suitable. I'm not ready to give up the material presence of an object or the trace of the person who made it. Digital images are compressed: it's difficult to see evidence of the hand. I'm interested in that accessibility, in making things without having to confront an interface whose function is somehow opaque to its user.

FISKE In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Sol LeWitt argued against a labyrinthine sort of Conceptualism. "Most ideas that are successful," he wrote, "are ludicrously simple." Much of your work stems from a simple gesture. What appeals to you about simplicity?

PICA When you see a glass stuck to the wall, you can imprint that image in your mind because it's compressed. And everything that happens from that moment on happens to you. The work becomes yours as a viewer; you get to live with it in your mind, to decompress it. It's something that literature does incredibly well. A good novel takes you on a journey and, at the same time, it makes room for its reader. All of the thoughts that you have and the images that you produce while you're reading, they're yours. So there's this perfect moment of stepping out into the world but remaining very consciously within your own ability to imagine. In my work, I would hope that simplicity opens a similar space that is entirely given over to the person who looks.

FISKE In performances like *Strangers* [2008], where two people hold either end of a string of bunting for an extended period, or the drawing *Post-it Note* [2009-10], formed by exposing a sheet of paper affixed with a Post-it note to the sun for one year, time figures as a sort of concrete duration. How do you conceive of time as it operates in your work?

PICA For me, time is not an abstraction, but something specific, even material. Whenever it appears in my work, it's manifest in the existence of an event or an object. That existence is always rather temporary, whether it's a four-day performance or a sculpture fashioned from cardboard, an ephemeral material which might not last. In the context of my work, there's no larger meaning to the word time than time as it's perceived. Likewise, there's no larger existence of objects beyond their appearance to a particular person in a particular space. It's this interdependency that interests me: how we need objects and how objects also need us.

In Spanish, the verb "to be" exists in two forms. The first, "ser," means to be something as a permanent quality: you are a person or you are American. The second, "estar," is a temporary state of being in which you're spending time doing something, like reading or walking. Existence

in activity is one thing; existence as this sort of idea of existence is another. In my work, I'm interested in what it means to spend time with something. Included in the show at MIT is the traveling sculpture, *I am Mit, as I am in Mit, just like a lot of other people are* [2013], whose title adapts to its location. Each participant houses it for one week before passing it to the next host. There's a literal way in which people spend time with the work.

The world makes no sense. We experience it as a series of events with no larger narrative. But, now and then, you'll have a moment when things suddenly fall together, and events string into narratives. In that moment, things appear to make sense, but, like any moment, it's temporary. It's that sense of time as something lived and fleeting that I try to capture in my work. My art comes together to exist, to make sense of something or of itself, and then fall apart.

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