

THE MULTIVERSE “LAS MANUELAS” BY OSCAR CUETO

Text by Marcello Farabegoli

In the past I worked with a remarkable Austrian artist who organises reviews of unread books. Now I have the strange feeling of finding myself in a similar situation.

On one hand, the work of the Vienna-based Mexican artist Oscar Cueto is so extensive that only a small fraction of it can be kept in memory. It consists of an evergrowing number of over three hundred sheets in A5 format (210 x 148.5 mm), with a selection of three hundred reproduced in this book. At first glance, many of the drawings that Cueto has created in ink, gouache, and watercolour on paper have something comical or slapstick about them. Instead of speech bubbles, geometric prompts probably taken from school books appear on the edges of the paper. According to the artist, each sheet is a story of its own with a beginning, climax, and resolution. More specifically, the drawings represent tiny “universes” that revolve around a real person named Manuela. In the messages conveyed to us more or less enigmatically, we recognise the artist’s previous reflections on the mechanisms and narratives that constitute memory/history/knowledge, documentation/fiction, art(market), and identity. Also, elements typical of Cueto’s work, such as ambiguity, eroticism/sex, irony/humor, horror etc., appear time and again. Not to overlook the “impeccable geometric exercises”, which I will talk about later.

On the other hand, “Las Manuelas” is also very much about Oscar Cueto himself, that is, about the artist as a Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art), if I may say so. Cueto is not only an excellent artist with a broad spectrum of media — drawing, painting, animation, video, installation, performance etc. — but also a curator, an entrepreneur, organiser of the nomadic anti-museum “MUME” (Museo Mexicano / Mexican Museum), a traveller between continents, languages, and cultures, a cosmopolitan and much more. And of this even thicker “book” — the chronicles of Oscar Cueto, so to speak — I confess to know only a few pages unfortunately. Usually I write texts about exhibitions during the curatorial process, that is, after having dealt intensively with the artists and/or their works for a while. This time, however, writing precedes the exhibition. To this end, I initially wanted to list everything that Oscar Cueto is *not*, to perform a special kind of “approximation” to get closer to his essence. This unusual idea was propelled by Cueto himself, since in his youth he had dealt with the topic of divine veneration of the artist, before arriving at a negation of the classical concept “artist”. But this path, or rather this technique borrow from so called “negative theology”, would lead beyond the scope of this text. Nevertheless, I mention it here to point out the complex nature of “Las Manuelas” and its creator.

Readers may now wonder why I am boring them with such personal reflections instead of describing Cueto’s work in more detail and depth. The reason is that the artist’s practice has in recent years become not only increasingly conceptual but also more relational and participatory. I am thinking particularly of Cueto’s project “Wundersammlung” (Collection of Miracles) in Vienna 2021 and the project “Of Exceptions and Miracles” he realised for Museo Jumex in Mexico City 2022.

So I wonder even more why the artist has chosen me of all people to curate his coming exhibition. Of course, this pleases me enormously, but at the same time I have the suspicion that perhaps it is actually me who is being “curated” in this project and not the other way around. In a sense that, thanks to Cueto’s subtle work, I am to rethink my role as curator and text author substantially. In solo exhibitions, a curator should be no more than a kind of critical observer, a faithful companion, a subtle stimulator, at best a sort of “amplifier” to the artist. For the exhibition of “Las Manueles”, associative images from “The Library of Babel” (1941) by Jorge Luis Borges come to my mind; they lead into a tower-like, vertiginous installation of countless sheets of paper ... The actual realisation will depend, of course, also on the framework conditions of the exhibition.

As regards the geometrical component of “Las Manueles”, Oscar Cueto is probably enticed by the fact that I studied physics. And indeed, geometry plays an important role in physics, as in general relativity, the quantum field theory, and in so-called supersymmetry in particle physics. Etymologically, the word “geometry” comes from the Greek *γεωμετρία* (geōmetría), composed from *γεω* (geō) and *μετρία* (metry), meaning “earth” and “measure” respectively, and can be interpreted as “measure of land”. But geometry is not only of great importance in the art of field survey and in the realm of mathematics and physics, but also recurs particularly in the history of art and philosophy.

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), for example, is considered the discoverer of perspective; Piero della Francesca (c. 1415–1492) devoted his important theoretical treatises on art to perspective, geometry, and trigonometry; and last but not least, Albrecht Dürer published his famous book “*Underweysung der Messung mit dem Zirckel und Richtscheit in Linien, Ebenen und gantzen Corporen*” (1525) as the first ever summary of the mathematical-geometric procedures of central perspective. These are just a few prominent figures in the art field who have dealt with geometry.

Finally, in the seventeenth century, Euclidean geometry, which had dominated this field of mathematics for more than two thousand years, became the methodological model for the philosophers of rationalism. A pivotal point of this movement is Baruch Spinoza’s main work of 1677, which bears the Latin title “*Ethica, Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*” (Ethics, expounded by the geometrical method). Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) also remained rooted in Euclidean geometry. And, it is also worth mentioning that, at the beginning of the 19th century, non-Euclidean geometry was discovered and later used in particular by Albert Einstein (1879–1955) for his formulation of the General Theory of Relativity. As we know, general relativity and quantum physics led to a radical paradigm shift in modern physics that would tremendously and fundamentally change our conception of space, time, and matter and therefore also our world view.

It is not surprising, then, that an artist like Oscar Cueto is fascinated by geometry. In “Las Manueles” he reuses, modifies, or remodels found drawings from classical representational geometry. He is not aware that here and there elements of projective geometry, that “primordial

geometry” from which Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry can be derived, may slip in. Cueto does not want to boast, nor is he a mathematician in any way. What ultimately concerns him is an ideal that he seeks to symbolise with his geometric drawings. The ideal of the measurable, the calculable, the supposedly universal laws of nature; the ideal of a pure world of ideas in a tense relationship with sensual reality, organic life, with our instincts and passions, our free will, and with the supposedly random, unexpected, sometimes even chaotic occurrences of fate.

It is worth mentioning here that Cueto’s fate has long and intimately been intertwined with that of Austrian artist Manuela P. G. For that reason, he has been dedicated to the drawing series “Las Manuelas” since 2019. On one hand, he tries to approach the true, that is, idealised, essence of Manuela through mathematics and geometry. At the same time, however, he also wants to portray her on a figurative and psychological level in his drawings. In doing so, he cannot but bring to the table his own experiences, thoughts, fears, and desires and to some extent also portray himself. It is no secret that knowledge of the other and self-knowledge go hand in hand.

In that context, Oscar Cueto speaks of a “genealogy of similarities” in the sense that artists should always be aware where they come from, what cultural heritage they carry, and where they want to go. Cueto names three artists from the late 18th to the mid-20th century as faithful companions and sources of inspiration for his series “Las Manuelas”. He speaks about them in an impressive way, which is why I would like to quote him here:

I owe to Francisco de Goya the unsettling ability to blend naturalism with caricaturism, his profound use of narrative, the incorporation of text into image, the sense of humor with which he approaches obscure subjects. “Hit with a club, son”, Goya whispered in my ear more than once.

The Mexican painter Hermenegildo Bustos, an ice-cream vendor by profession, taught me with his anti-academic and discreet painting style that a good portrait is not a matter of pictorial skill. Humility and simplicity are good friends of a psychological portrait. Grandiloquence impresses the careless but does not satisfy those who seek complexity in the characters.

Finally, I took on Francis Picabia’s ability to steal, his ability to use already existing elements and already invented languages. The belief that we all come from somewhere and that ownership is a fantasy. Property is theft.

“Las Manuelas” is an emotional connection to a person, but it is also a summary of the cinema, literature, and visual art I come from. It is a classical portrait that uses drawing as a technique; with it, I intend to show that behind my conceptual works there is a structure and an honouring of the line that lend me stability. This is the space, the energy, and the crucial will to love art, to love someone, and to get up every morning to create more art.

Out of this love for the line, and no less for Manuela, Oscar Cueto uses the manifold geometric constructions that support the depicted bodies like imaginary scaffolding and seem to arrange and connect everything somehow. Thus we live and love as humans, believing that we move through the world freely, although we are evidently also guided by laws: physical, biological, psychological, or even metaphysical ones. While the paintings of the old masters sometimes refer to “secret geometries” as underlying principles of the harmony of composition, Oscar Cueto presents us with the hidden laws of nature that prevail above, around and within us. Or rather he insinuates them. Because, of course, the artist cannot and does not want to fathom the complexity of being with mere lines. On the contrary: if one looks closely and emphasises with the multiverse of Cueto’s “Las Manuelas”, something like an immutable and eternal being — the “matrix”, if I’m allowed this (cinematic) allusion — seems to resonate discreetly through the very interplay of contrasting visual languages. And if I look even closer, two happy faces emerge in my consciousness, interpenetrating and mingling with each other. They wink at me with a smile.

(Translation from German into English by Marlehne Lahmer)