

Gesamtkunstwerk Jaime Gili

I had been thinking of writing about Jaime Gili for a while. Lack of time delayed the endeavor. Now, the exhibition *Everything is Borrowed* at Alejandra von Hartz art gallery in Miami has given me the perfect excuse.

Before I start to expound on a series of considerations and ideas about Jaime Gili's painting, I believe – as I set forth in my latest book (1) – that it is important to speak about the current state of painting and that unstoppable return – or rather, excess. “Has painting once more become urgent? It is said that the actual interest –writes David Lillington (2) – is the consequence of 9/11. The art world has panicked and goes back to the most safe, commercial, and conservative art form: painting. Maybe it's true, maybe not, but it is evident that painting is a witness to a small resurgence.” History always repeats itself, albeit with small retouching here and there. Back in the 80's, Benjamin Buchloh¹ had already outlined, in the form of “a new classicism”, the (periodical) return of easel painting and traditional values; just as it had happened with Picasso, Malevich, Derain, Severini, Carrá and many others since 1915, and with a special fervor in the interwar period.

It seems highly pertinent to remember this moment of classicism, which irremediably pushes us towards Jean Cocteau's old and well-known *Le Rappel à l'ordre*. And I say that it seems *highly pertinent*, because Jaime Gili's pictorial proposition lies at the Antipodes of this current aesthetic orthodoxy, delving into an integral, coherent and ambitious practice of what we may refer to as “expanded painting” (3) : the *relationship and interaction of painting with other media* such as photography, video, installation, performance, sculpture or the digital,

1 Buchloh, Benjamin "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," reprinted from October 16 (Fall 1981), pages 39-68 and published as part of an essay collection titled *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, 1984, ed. Brian Wallis, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, pp. 107-137.

and *on any kind of support*. Secondly, Gili's work links with the Wagnerian spirit of the total work of art, or *gesamtkunstwerk*, because of its interdisciplinary focus and ambition, which comprises different art genres, such as installation, or public art and architecture. Finally, I would also like to make reference to the "nomadic" character of his life - Caracas, Barcelona, London - which shapes and nourishes his artistic practice and that search, or rather *ricorso*: a return to concerns and matters that constitute the roots, contradictions and conflicts of artistic and social order of his native Venezuela.

There are some concepts that I consider it is interesting to touch upon when explaining the contemporary character of Gili's work, as most references to said work have been widely established in previous texts. These texts discuss references to Venezuelan modernity, public space and popular culture -Jesús Fuenmayor, Juan Ledezma, Edgar Alfonso Sierra-, to European modernity -Barry Schwabsky- or to (post) modern concerns such as repetition, speed or movement - Sacha Craddock, David Ryan.

Taking a retrospective look at Jaime Gili's work, we become aware of the fact that, throughout these years, his pictorial development has been governed by an overwhelming logic, however much this logic may be labeled as "unknown knowns". Let me explain myself. The year 1998 entails a rupture - not in the literal sense - for that is when the first juxtapositions take place of abstract-minimalist car doors - "PhA" type - and the first kinetic compositions that slowly adopt the form of tall and elongated paintings, leaning on the wall - "GFP". In the year 2001, the first series of the stars arrives - "alma" - and with it Gili materializes that stylistic change that had been showing through. Already as from 2003, which coincides with his first trip back to Venezuela, everything begins to fit and that "unknown knowns" becomes "known knowns"; which would bring us to the latest series, *Everything is Borrowed*, and a new turn of the screw.

However, before analyzing the works on show at Alejandra von Hartz art gallery, it is imperative to analyze the conceptual load of his work and, particularly, the sense that Gili assigns to the concept of “modernism” and his ability for change and utopia. I must say that I have a different perception from Jaime’s with respect to the idea of modernism or the lasting value of said modernism. In my opinion, the modern project has ended, it is *kapputt*, for post-modernity, with Derrida and Virilio at the front, imbued science and progress with such enormous mistrust, considering them corrupted by capitalism, that they proved incapable of arriving at the truth and bringing about the longed for change (5). According to Jaime Gili, “The European modernist project may have failed or ended, but not elsewhere: in South America there are still many cities to build, and it may be something sustainable from an ecological point of view. [...] In my opinion, modernity is a spiritual state, the willingness to work alongside others in order to attain a specific goal, beyond mere formalities. And the austerity, the use, of the materials that are necessary nowadays, like recycling, fit my idea of modernity in a perfect way. In this sense, Carlos Raúl Villanueva is a perfect example, because to build the “Universidad Central de Venezuela” he requested the collaboration of visual artists from the very beginning of the project.” (6) Jaime understands that his modernity is possible, in spite of the fact that some may consider it utopian. Quoting American sociologist Daniel Bell: “ The idea of revolution still mesmerizes some, but real problems arise on the day after the revolution.”(7) [And I find it practically impossible not to think about the current situation in Venezuela.] On the other hand, let me make myself clear, I do not subscribe to post-capitalist, post-historic sensationalism and the idea that all that remains is the market or what is left of it.

But let us go back to the total work of art or *gesamtkunstwerk*, and that for two reasons: 1) for Jaime Gili, art is *idea-based* and not *medium-based*, generating a dialectic that is nourished by diverse media and disciplines in the framework of

one work of art alone and independently of the context, be it the mobile design for a helmet or bus, a poster, a public art project or an intervention in an art gallery; 2) because it links with the very Wagnerian idea of staging and influencing the perception and imagination by fully immersing the spectator in the midst of the work.

In this way, in the exhibition *Everything is Borrowed* there is, on one hand, an interaction between the wide gallery wall – which the artist has directly intervened– and a group of works on paper and some paintings, and on the other hand, a series of narrow and elongated paintings – “pistas” – reminiscent of “Oterian” (8) aesthetics, inserted in the space, which rest on the art gallery’s beams. The spectator is able to stroll along the mural on the lookout for the possible narrative in it, or move among the paintings whose backs are exposed, in which is for Gili a wink towards Lina Bo Bardi’s Museum of Modern Art of Sao Paulo of the 40s, the design of which was thought of as without walls, in such a way that the reverse side of the paintings could be seen, but that reminds me also of Peggy Guggenheim’s exhibition *Art of this Century in New York* (1942). Like back then, the explicit insertion of the spectator in the *mise en scène* is important, forcing the work of art – the object – and the spectator – the subject – to share the same universe.

The contrast between the spotless mural and the paintings, which we now experience as freer and with more gesture, “rougher” and, even, with visible drips, give us a glimpse of a practice in which repetition and symmetry have, gradually, given way to more spontaneity and dynamism. The stars have been left behind. Is this the new (fast) track along which Jaime Gili wants us to drive now that *Everything is Borrowed*?

Paco Barragán

NOTES

1. Vid. Barragán, Paco, *The Art Fair Age/La era de las ferias*, CHARTA (2008), Milan.
2. Lillington, David *Is schilderkunst weer urgent?*, *Metropolis M*, 2003, nr. 2, p. 57-58
3. Buchloh, Benjamin "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," reprinted from *October* 16 (Fall 1981), pages 39-68 and published as part of an essay collection titled *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, 1984, ed. Brian Wallis, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, pp. 107-137.
4. For a full description of this concept see the chapter on "The advent of expanded painting" in *The Art Fair Age/La era de las ferias*, pp.60-71.
5. The concept of "modernism" represents, from my point of view, a western vision and imposition distant from other artistic and geographical "modernities". For the same reason I understand that Bourriaud's "alter-modernism" concept, besides being a *contradictio in terminis*, is born dead. In any case, we would be in the age of "neo-modernity", but it would be good to find a term that would avoid words formed with "modernism" or "vanguard" and the prefixes "pre", "post", "ante", "hyper", "ultra" or "alter". There is the challenge to come up with a concept that brings together the various modernities that occur at the same time and with different rhythms in our globalized world.
6. E-mail exchange with Jaime Gili dated February 21, 2009.
7. Bell, Daniel, *Las contradicciones culturales del capitalismo*, Madrid, 1977, Alianza Editorial, pp. 39-40.
8. T.N. Related to Venezuelan kinetic artist Alejandro Otero.