



## A Peruvian perspective

*Julian McKinnon talks to Antonio Paucar and Gabriela Salgado about the importance of non-visual senses, of sound, smell and touch, and the Andean concept of good living.*

Removed from its background context of lavish yachts bobbing in gleaming water, Silo 6 would loom imposingly over the disused tramlines that wind their way toward it along the Auckland Waterfront. Shot from the right angle, the stark concrete structure would be at home in a post-apocalyptic film. You can imagine its #noir presence lurking through your Instagram feed, surrounded by advertisements for the latest gadgets. I sauntered into the structure under a slate-grey sky in May, when it fulfilled the very different role of playing host to Te Tuhi's offsite project, *Acts of Passage*.

Curated by Gabriela Salgado, *Acts of Passage* drew upon performance practices from Aotearoa and around the Southern Hemisphere. Much of the Silo 6 installation was made up of video works, with performances taking place at scheduled intervals.

I was there to see Antonio Paucar perform *Memories from Inside*, a new work from the Berlin-based Peruvian artist. Having arrived early, I spent some time in front of a screen propped on cinder blocks. It was playing a video of a man suspended upside down in a tree, unravelling a textile cocoon from within.

Opposite page: Antonio Paucar, *Altar* (still), 2005, HD video, 2:40 min. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Antonio Paucar, *Suspendido en la Queñua* (still), 2014. HD video, 27:00 min, duration for exhibition 5:43 min. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



With a small group of participants, I was led into a darkened room for the performance. We were handed blindfolds and invited to sit on bean bags. A minuscule candle was placed on the floor. The tiny flame danced, a wooden flute was played. When the candle exhausted itself, we were instructed to put on our blindfolds. The experience then unfolded without language or sight. Sounds, scents and spatial sensations were the media through which Paucar delivered his work – the buzzing of a spinning object, a soft breeze against the face, guttural whisperings and the sense of someone moving past at close quarters. The smell of fresh herbs occasionally punctuated the darkness: lemon verbena, sage, thyme and mint, along with other less identifiable smells, pungent and of the earth. Musical instruments were played as if signalling changing phases, a gently strummed guitar acknowledged the conclusion.

I met Paucar and Salgado a few days earlier, in a Ponsonby apartment. Paucar spoke first in English, then switched to Spanish for ease of expression. Salgado translated, often interjecting her own thoughts. We sipped green tea and navigated the fluctuating rhythm of this conversation. “I wanted to explore an alternative way of making art that is not dependent on creating images,” says Paucar. “With today’s technology, images are overwhelmingly present – to the point of saturation. We are conditioned by our visual perception, and in order to get away from that, you need to stimulate the other senses: hearing, smell, the tactile sense. This work is about activating those senses in the participants.”

The performance took place in a darkened room and when blindfolded the darkness was near absolute. “Many Andean rituals take place in darkness, and I think you can connect with yourself better that way,” says Paucar. “What the participants experience is a part of the work. I collect their thoughts through journals. People can make a drawing or write something after the performance, and then I learn from their perceptions.”

Associative and open to interpretation, *Acts of Passage* seemed to invite inward reflection, the following of memory and inner awareness. My own entry into the journal was a drawing of concentric circles coupled with a long note recounting a particularly vivid dream from many years before. It had come back to me during the performance with surprising clarity.

Was activating the inner experience for his audience connected to a desire to foster social change? “No, I don’t think so,” says Paucar. “I think one produces art in order to understand oneself, in order to discover who and what that self is.”

Geographical and cultural distance has played a crucial role in his own self-discovery. “All artists work with their own knowledge and context, and my context is the Andean world. That’s where I was born and educated. In Huancayo, where I grew up, there was no contemporary art museum, so I had no exposure to that framework. When I first went to Germany it was like a mirror. I could see and understand my own knowledge and culture. I saw Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* at a museum in Berlin. I couldn’t relate to it or understand why he used that object that way, but it made me remember how I would play with a bicycle wheel as a child. You know, running the wheel with a stick.”

That encounter inspired Paucar’s 2005 video work *Marcelinho*, in which he disassembles a replica of Duchamp’s work, douses the stool in accelerant and sets it ablaze, then playfully rolls the wheel around with a stick. The conversation moved into a critique of the associative prevalence of Western art. Paucar’s 2011 work *Somersault in Yves Klein Blue* shows the artist standing on a mat covered in blue paint and performing a somersault against a white wall to create a pair of blue footprints. “With that work, I created a fiction. I didn’t know about Yves Klein when I made it. I was making marks with my feet using red, and then I wanted to use blue. It’s interesting that in the art world people always make that association, because Yves Klein



Antonio Paucar, *Somersault in Yves Klein Blue*, 2013, blue pigment, single video projection, HD video, 3:00 min. Installation view, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB/Thomas Bruns 2013–2014. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



Antonio Paucar, *Marcelinho* (still), 2005. Video, 13:00 min. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



didn't invent blue. I used his name in the title of the work so as not to have to explain myself all the time."

This was also an important aspect of Salgado's curatorial premise for the exhibition. "Performance is not an invention of Western art. It didn't start in the 1960s, or even with the Dadaists in the 1920s. In the same way sculpture and painting are not exclusive to Western history. They belong to human history and they're present in all cultures."

This is what she, as a curator, is particularly interested in. "Across the global South, I'm looking at how performance is being practiced by people who are not taking reference exclusively from Western history. Having said that, Antonio studied in England and in Germany, Rebecca Horn mentored him for many years in Berlin. It's not that he's not aware of that tradition; it's that the work he makes has more to do with his own traditions and knowledge systems."

Paucar's cultural environment is the mountainous region in Peru. "In the Andean world, there isn't the same kind of division between the individual and the community as in the West," he says. "Communal thinking is very important, as is understanding our connection to the natural world. That has been my experience of life, and so my work integrates that way of thinking. There's a lot of respect for nature in my culture. There are celebrations of planting and harvest, of seasonal changes. The processes of nature are part of daily life because we are a part of nature, not separate from or superior to it."



Antonio Paucar, *Suspendido en la Queñua*, (still) 2014, HD video, 27:00 min, duration for exhibition 5:43 min. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Salgado agrees. “This is a point of difference between Western thinking and indigenous cultures. From the Enlightenment, we have been taught that we control nature, that nature is messy. We have inherited that. For the Andean world, and many indigenous world views, that is not the case. We owe nature respect, because it has the capacity to decide our fate.”

We moved on to talk about Paucar’s work *Suspendido en la Queñua* (*Suspended in the Queñua tree*), the video work of a man hanging upside down from a tree, emerging from a cocoon made of Alpaca wool. “Textiles are extremely important to Andean people; as important as paper is for Westerners,” says Paucar. “Alpacas are very useful animals at high altitude, they are strong and can carry a lot of weight, and their meat is edible. Their wool has a lot of uses, and it’s very warm. Also in Peru, the word ‘alpaca’ is sometimes used in a derogatory way about Andean people, particularly by the dominant class in Lima...it’s a hangover of colonisation.”

This tree that features in the video is rare – which is why he chose it. “It’s a native Queñua. It doesn’t exist in many parts of the country anymore, though it was very abundant before the Spanish came. Colonisation didn’t just destroy the lives of indigenous people, it also destroyed indigenous plant life. So, this work is symbolically very loaded. The action I am performing is an act of metamorphosis, a transformation.”

Discussing this work and the ideas behind it soon shifted us into the realm of spirituality. “I am very invested in addressing the spirituality of indigenous cultures, which is

very strong,” says Paucar. “It is like food; it is nurturing; it is an inextricable aspect of life. When I go to Europe I’m confronted with the fact that people are starved of spiritual connection. This is part of what drives the consumerist desire for the newest gadget, the newest clothes, the newest hairstyle. It’s like all that consumption is an attempt to fill the spiritual vacuum. To be clear, I am not talking about religion; I’m talking about a deep sense of connection that goes beyond the material world.”

Connection to life and beyond is a key principle of *Acts of Passage*, adds Salgado. “The performances in this exhibition all involve ritual, which can be practised in a non-religious way to improve the condition of life, to re-establish balance,” she says. The Andean expression *sumak kawsay* (literally ‘good living’) is particularly relevant. “It’s a concept that was adopted by Bolivia and Ecuador in their legal system, and is based on the understanding that if we destroy nature, we are going to suffer. Because we are not separate from nature. Seeing ourselves as connected to everything is important to re-establishing our relationship to the world and ourselves.”

Today’s culture is rife with more and faster visual stimulus, incessant advertising, and social media feeds intertwining the personal and the commercial. Re-establishing balance, connecting with ourselves and each other, and occasionally stepping outside of our predominant visual perception is important, even necessary. *Acts of Passage* offered a welcome tonic.