

DRAWING MATTER, OR LAURA MESA'S PHILOSOPHICAL ALCHEMY

by Joana P. R. Neves

¹ Laura Mesa—EXHIBITLab;
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*When I stepped into the space where I first saw the work *La Piedra de la Locura*, 2018, the word “brain” popped into my mind, as it probably did for most of the visitors of the exhibition¹: seven narrow, elegant white shelves across a wall, held irregular, black volumes similar to the brain. Similar, but never quite like the accommodating walnut-like symmetry usually highlighted in its popular imagery. Some shapes looked like elongated halves of a brain, others like fossils of snails, and others like tongues of an unknown creature. The organic shapes appeared to be able to fit into one another, and yet it was obvious that they didn't.*

This felt like one of those works of art that remains with you long after you have seen it. Despite my brief contact with it in a hot Santander morning of July, its refusal to meet expectations, its solipsistic darkness, the enigmatic disposition of those “specimens” in shelves kept creeping into my memory. Being aphantasic, that is, not being able to visualise, is an unexpected advantage when it comes to art: I focus much more on the embodiment of the work rather than on its visual memory. I long for the real experience of the work, which for me has to be physical or, barring that, supported by photographic imagery. I am emotionally connected to it, rather than visually. And in this non-visual memory of the work, it progressively damned on me that the experience of *La Piedra de la Locura* emphasised a consciousness of our faculties and their representations, and challenged the traditional dichotomy between the body and the mind. It also appeared to be one of those moments in an artist's career that defines a whole practice, much like the exhibition that Mesa is working on while I write this text.

Indeed, the project *Pensar el Final Compromete el Final* is an ambitious project where the amplitude of *La Piedra de la Locura* is taken to a larger human scale, from the wall to the exhibition space. In it, Mesa turns the gallery into a drawing through a play with light and display. In this text, I will make a journey from the former to the latter by exploring her work with graphite and ink, solidified, as well as silk paper, (the *pnem* series, 2020, for instance).

The alchemy Mesa employs to make her self-standing drawings with ink and graphite is inextricable from a research into the exact amount of each element to make a material that resonates with the spectator's imagination. It is also reliant on the repeated gesture of drawing, of the almost bureaucratic aspect of mark-making (gestures that the short story by Pablo D'Ors, published in this catalogue, brilliantly exposes) as if she recorded the layers of the unfathomable relation between the time of the world and the time of the spirit through the time of drawing. As the reader and spectator probably knows already, the artist conveys with delightful complexity, and yet with timeless restraint, a delicate constellation of material, image, thought, representation and both the individual and the communal body in an altered exhibition space.

THE BRAIN IN THE BODY: AN IMAGE

In *La Piedra de la Locura*, the hand-sized objects stimulated an idea of the brain while not faithfully (or, rather, photo-realistically) representing it. Moreover, the materiality of the brain was emphasized through its unusual appearance as a dark substance. And the title of the piece, *The Stone of Folly* (a reference to the medieval practice of extracting a hypothetical stone from the brain that supposedly caused madness), reminded us of the importance of the brain as an organ throughout history, where early on, philosophers and physicians alike situated a number of diseases and faulty behaviour. But more importantly, it meta-linguistically presented the carnal forum of ideas both as an idea itself forming through its different shapes, and as an image of said organic database of images.

For, where do images stand in this tidy separation between mind and matter when it comes to their fleshy supposed origin? Where do representations lie, and how to they come to be, and where? While I stood observing the work, my own grey matter worked tirelessly to comprehend the dynamic between the different organic elements; meanwhile, my body sensed the material quality of their disturbingly black matter. Their shininess suggested that they might have been made of a resin or a wax of some kind, alluding to a physical nature somewhere between a state of solidity and elasticity. Not quite flesh, but not stone either².

The brain, the presumed location of ideas and images, is not symmetrical; rather, it is regional, inasmuch as its functions are located in specific regions of the cerebral matter, as we have come to know since the nineteenth century. The plasticity of the brain is now an established fact, and a better representation of the brain is, indeed, fragmentary and modular. Insofar as the "lateralization" of the brain suggests that its two hemispheres command different abilities and are far more complex than simply two opposing sides, it is the body as a whole that sublimates the cerebral electric information into representations, that is, actions, feelings, and thoughts.

² The artist states as materials for this piece, as well as others, "agglutinated graphite".

We could even expand the notion of images and call them signs, like *La Piedra de la Locura's* black brains could be considered too. These, in return, can reorganize the brain (to some extent!) if they are recurrent enough, which is what we call “plasticity”, and which is the experience that the work stimulates empirically, and suggests as a representation, with its repetition of a number of specific and different shapes. Mesa explains that “drawing a brain means that we represent the machine of representation”³. But it also made me think of how representations re-design the brain. And especially, how Mesa’s work can contribute to it.

3 <http://www.lauramesa.art/la-piedra-de-la-locura/> [consulted on 24 July 2021]

Which is to say that the body (and not solely the brain), in its movement, is the producer of the volatile and the intangible, or, more concretely, thoughts and imaginations, that the artist herself mentions apropos of this work. She considers that, like the work of art, the brain is but a “physical substratum which is the perceptible as object, that only makes sense as a container, and the trigger of a system of relationships or connections as valuable as intangible”⁴. These connections, that is, emotional and analytical thinking, touch upon what Bergson addressed as the “relation between matter and mind” in his book about the bio-motricity of memory.

4 Idem.

At the time of the publication of *Matière et Mémoire* (1896), it was worth establishing, as he did, that the brain is in the body, and the body is in the physical world, which appears and exists for us as a set of images. In fact, he asked the reader to forget everything they knew about materialism and idealism, in order to accept a simple premise: that matter is an ensemble of “images”, that he explained as simply and as non-ideologically as possible. Images, he wrote, are half-way between “things” and “representations”⁵. Therefore, even my own body, and the brain in it, is a material-immaterial thing. It is concrete-intangible stuff. It is capable of ideation while being part of the material world. But however ground-breaking this notion of the body as a dynamic ideation was, Bergson still followed the European fashion of the binomial dynamic between mind and matter, the mind and the body, of which the “souvenir” (reminiscence) he considered to be the “intersection”. This overturned reality –the body as image, and the image as an almost-thing– is what *La Piedra de la Locura* induces as a reality, by being a material image of that reality-as-idea.

5 Henri Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire, Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit*: <http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/PhiloSophie/bergson-en-version-numerique/> [consulted on 25 July 2021].

The tradition of separating mind and body is one of the strongest pillars of occidental thought but not only as separated entities: rather, as existing at all in such a way. The philosopher José Gil, in his book *Metamorfoses do Corpo* quotes a conversation between the missionary Leenhart and a Christianised Caledonian: the first asks the second if it was the spirit that Europeans brought to his people, to which the bewildered native replied that they always knew about the spirit; it was the body that Christianity introduced to their culture⁶. However, the work of Mesa, through drawing in its most elemental and dynamic nature, works precisely as a unique strategy to associate the body to matter as a spiritual thing.

6 José Gil, *Metamorfoses do Corpo, A Regra do Jogo*, Edições LDA., 1980, p. 48.

Inherently, I have always suspected that we believe that the brain and the body are not an element of a simple dichotomy of parallel and similar mechanisms. Descartes, notorious for finding make-shift answers to big questions –believed to have found the interface between the body and the mind in what he denominated the Pineal Gland inside the brain. Likewise, the Stone of Folly, was a myth that located madness in the brain, concatenated as a stone that, once extracted, could give back the mental stability to the patient believed to be mad. Therefore, if there is a threshold between the body and the mind in biological matter, this

means that matter is able to be the producer of images and that these are part of our physical world, however intangible they may be. Isn't language—or the huge ensemble of signs, from smiles to the word *disegno*—one of the most mysterious intersections between the spirit and the world (to put in in a more Caledonian way), and its adjacent function, communication?

DRAWING AS CONCRETE PHILOSOPHY

As we know since Walter Benjamin's take on technology, from the twentieth century onward, artists have infused their work with technologies existing and functioning outside the realm of art. However, his notion of technology pertains to any system capable of bringing operative solutions to artistic problems, while bringing limited and specific uses to established systems in the ultra-industrialized and global world. Now, in order not to perpetrate binomial separations of the mind-body kind between technology and craftsmanship, I prefer to explain that by technologies I mean any system with its own rules that unfold a reality of any kind from it, from A.I. to cooking, in line with Walter Benjamin, Bertold Brecht and Tamara Trodd after them⁷. In Mesa's case, this pertains to the use of information gathered by algorithmic technologies about countries and their behaviour as a society, which touches upon identity—as-number. Her series of works *pnem* have as a starting point the ONU data-base, accessible to everyone on the internet, that serves as a basis of discussions between nations, as if it was the lived reality of the citizens who are discussed.

Taking the ONU's database of sheer data encompassing all countries –with the exception of those whose data are not collated or who refuse to provide it– is using the portrait of the globalized world as numbers. Taking this into account, in the series *pnem*– Mesa uses as many sheets of silk paper as the data she uses as a matrix for the work: 27 000, in her installation of *pnem* of 2020, disposing them in little piles corresponding to a unitary basis for each pile (one can imagine it to be a country, a city, a community, an ethnicity for instance). These little piles are aggregated with graphite powder seemingly solidified, forming little entities that resist any known category in fine art or in the world at large. (The only similarity I can find are with Mira Schendel's *Trenzinho* of 1965, for instance, or even *Droguinhas* of the same year.) What are they? The graphite did not mark a drawing gesture, neither was it used as a pencil or a pigment. The sheet of paper was not used as a surface to hold an image thus disappearing beneath it. Rather, it stands out in its vulnerable fragility. The used paper is thin and seems absorbent, that is, likely to become even more charged with meaning. With a sort of ontological strategy, or concrete sense of philosophy, Mesa leads us to ask the 27 century-old metaphysical question of identity, of being. What is it? But also, and perhaps more akin to Benjamin's thinking: What is it?

In Benjamin's time, technology was still analogic and mostly mechanical although Taylorism was an established philosophy and Ada Lovelace (England, 1815-1852)⁸ and Etienne-Jules Marey (France, 1830–1906)⁹ had already devised systems and technologies able to produce more data than the brain could comprehend, in the primal sense of the word – to embrace with one's mind. Comprehension is the haptics of the spirit, and therefore the limit of its elasticity. There is only so much data one can absorb, such as the 27 000 papers gathering the graphite matter that works as a glue but also residue. Worse yet, and this is particularly

7 Tamara Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction, Technology and Aesthetics from Duchamp to the Digital*, University of Chicago Press, 2015: this book is an original take on technology and its influence in art and thought across the twentieth century after Brecht and Benjamin's ideas of technology as a macro-system external to artistic traditions but inherently part of it –as in any other area of human activity– influencing even the structures of society.

8 Ada Lovelace wrote the first computer program based on algorithms, for the first computer ever, called Analytical Engine, designed by Charles Babbage (1791–1871), had it ever been built.

9 Etienne-Jules Marey was a French scientist responsible for the systematisation and invention of graphic recording machines, including chronophotography, that measured nature's movement through graphic renderings and sequential photography. The data his machines were able to record surpassed the ability to calculate them mathematically.

poignant today, there is only so much dynamic between data systems and data elements that humans can comprehend: exponential calculations for instance, key to understanding the spread of the current Covid19 pandemic, are, a scientist complained to The Guardian, arduous for the human mind to grasp, for instance. Mesa's installations focus yet on another aspect of the subjects of the data: each one is a layered system in itself, perhaps even an idiosyncratic one.

Mesa's *pnm* title is an acronym for *Pero No El Mundo (But Not The World)*, which is the final part of a sentence about an aspect of the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas explaining that thinking about the end compromises the end, "but not the world" – which is the title of the exhibition celebrated by this publication. The work is therefore a space of interrogation of the world in its composition of individualities or singularities that are also identities and numbers. (The acronym, with its delightful ring, turns the artwork wordless and asemantic but also emulates the bureaucratic use of letters and numbers.) But how do these come together? How does an idea, a number, become part of the world? And what does it say? The latter is a much harder question to answer, and I will not attempt to do it here. I think that if there is any human space of freedom, it certainly is art, by prompting questions, debate and perhaps even action, more than answers.

The image, however, appears to be the dynamic element that could address the first question. For instance, a work from 2019, *Imagen (Image)*, is a dark grey block measuring 10 × 45 × 10 cm only, replicating a minimalist aesthetic. Nevertheless, once we come close to it, it reveals itself as a layered block made of paper, graphite powder and ink held together by an unrevealed substance that gains an almost mythical status. The latter literally holds the sheets of paper together between blocks of what one assumes to be solidified ink; the whole is considered to be "imagen" –image. If we expand its meaning to a Bergsonian line of thought, it is precisely situated between things and representations. It is, ultimately, what speaks to us of the world– or perhaps our world; but, also, what speaks to the world of us. A movement rather than a thing, a thing, rather than a number - in the world.

Mesa's interrogations are straightforwardly and wholeheartedly philosophical but the way they are laid out is inherently concrete and material. She talks about her work as "solidified drawing", inasmuch as her drawing is concept too, in line with the technological turn of the twentieth century that opened up artistic practice to heterogeneity. Indeed, artists in the twentieth century veered away from traditional artistic practices towards specialized knowledge, while creating a space for creativity like no other. Artists are still knowledgeable technically, but they are also ethnographers, musicians, film-makers and, in Mesa's case, philosophers. More specifically, one can locate Mesa's art in the confluence between philosophy and *disegno* theory –not to be confused with the practice of drawing in the Renaissance– as contemporary drawing. Ten years after obtaining her PhD in Fine Arts in the area of Drawing (2008), she graduated in Philosophy (2018), an academic path that corresponds to a contemporary take on *disegno*, which values the practice of drawing as conceptualization. As Sol LeWitt wrote: "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art"¹⁰. Nevertheless, and contrary to most male conceptual artists, Mesa took the tools of drawing for their philosophical and semiotic value, in kinship with Mira Schendel, or closer to our time, the Catalan artist Blanca Casas Brullet, favouring paper, language, graphite, thought and data alike. Especially paper, in the *pnm* series.

10 Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, Artforum, vol. 5, no. 10, Summer 1967.

The area of drawing that Mesa employs to establish her concrete philosophy is, undoubtedly, *disegno*. After Giorgio Vasari deemed drawing, or *disegno*, as the father of all arts, Federico Zuccaro confessed that he would use the word concept instead of it, if had been speaking of the same subject he treats in his magnum opus *The Idea of Sculptors, Painters, and Architects* (1607) to philosophers. *Disegno*, means concept, in his view, like God means nature in Baruch Spinoza's, if we were to establish a parallel. Rather than simplifying matters, these associations create folds in reality and reveal it to be much more pliant than suspected. In that sense, and once we look at Mesa's series of installations *pnem*, we comprehend her language to be that of *disegno*: paper sheets, graphite and ink are used as the tools of drawing but also as concepts pertaining to the flesh, the surface and dynamic thought. They are part of the lexicon of the body, the image and reality, associating all of them in a unique way.

THE SCALE OF LAURA MESA'S ALCHEMY

What holds the drawing together is the drawing itself. Of course, the drawing material holds it but then again, what is a drawing if not the possibility of a tangible image (even if it is not realised and exists solely as a diagram in a collector's office as it could happen with a Lawrence Wiener work)? What is drawing if not the tangibility of the intangible? For this exhibition, Mesa imagined the space as drawing, in her most ambitious project so far: she built a space within a space, darkened as if covered in graphite, by slightly shifting the dimensions of the room sideways, thus creating an internal and an external area indoors, de-territorialising the space. It is up to the spectator to re-territorialise elsewhere, and it is strongly suggested that it could be the fragmented body.

In fact, the solidified drawings Mesa brings to the exhibition are body parts, especially articulations, such as elbows and knees, right in the area where they move and potentially shift, like the space has. On top of them, graphite sheets are apposed, as if to suggest solidified intention, focus, and time –the ethos of drawing. Mesa's fascination with the dark matter of graphite and ink is here blown up in the space, as if the spectator was inside a drawing but also associated with its obscurity. There is an eerie relation between seeing and feeling in Mesa's work, whereby its darkness almost seems to reject the gaze and force it inwards. Introspectively, one understands the time of the making of the drawing, one sees– with one's inner eye - the matter evolving, the hands, working, repeatedly, to create something that is not supposed to be seen as much as it is supposed to be articulated with the other senses and the whole of the nervous system, up to the brain, immersively.

In fact, one of the dimensions of her work that is still to be addressed, is the process of accumulation of gestures that produces an unusual scale for drawing. This is particularly visible in *pnem.extremos*, 2020 where several blocks of solidified ink hold small piles of graphite sheets, all set on a table. The whole group of elements turns the scale of the drawing quite monumental – for this particular practice -, which is the case for several other pieces. More impressive even, is the scale of time that it takes to make the work. The space occupied by the material is equivalent to the time Mesa has spent aggregating the materials, by working on her personal alchemy that contains everything together.

The originality of Mesa's "metadrawings" as Verónica Farizo called them, is their refusal to represent something. In fact, although the theory of *disegno* in the Renaissance was intriguing and intellectually stimulating, its practice remained ancillary to the great arts of architecture, painting and sculpture. It was the theory of *disegno* that we inherited, which contributed to overturn the submissive role of drawing, pursued by Mesa with temerity: the materials take centre stage in the rough, thus transvaluating the values that produced the traditional alchemy of the drawn image, that is, the rubbing off of friable matter against a surface that held it, usually depicting recognizable things in the world. By showing the alchemic components of images, Mesa introduces, rather, the idea, the concept, the notion of representation, in a critical manner, into the exhibition space. Moreover, she forces drawing to exist in the same space as the spectator, as a sensible body, potentially transformed by a performed train of thought. As communication.

I think statistics and numbers are important; I do not share the dread they induce in certain cultural philosophies. However, I do believe that they do not communicate, they inform. They provide the number, the potential wave, the obligatory exception, provided that the hypothetical question that presided to the survey is pertinent, but, more importantly, provided that the numbers are not mistaken for thought. As Mesa alerts us to, presence, time and care are what matters, because matter is image, and images are transmission beyond words, straight into the flesh of existence. The importance of life's meaningful experience is to be found beyond timely words, quantifiable modalities and even beauty.

For Mesa's work has that kind of beauty one needs to get accustomed to and then becomes part of one's own imagination. Indeed, and perhaps this is a personal take, Mesa's drawing is haunting, it stands in the space like a ghost, that is, a subliminal presence one can't quite situate. It deviates our habits and outperforms expected behaviours. As if this "world" that Habermas posited as non-changeable was the spectral reality one finds in the numbers of the ONU excel sheets. It is not surprising that the exhibition *Pensar el Final Compromete el Final* finally took over the space, as if the space was, itself, the spectre, and our bodies –which are more than the sum of their organs– were the most carnal of concepts.

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