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Large-Scale Optical Illusion

ENTRE ACTOS (BETWEEN ACTS) by Fabiola Torres-Alzaga

ITALA SCHMELZ *



A decade ago, Fabiola Torres-Alzaga came to visit me at the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros (SAPS) when I was its director; she walked into my office--a tall, slender and elongated figure—holding a rectangular object that looked like a briefcase. It was the first prototype of *Porta-infinitos* (2004); she set it on my desk, opened it, unfolded it and assembled it, then invited me to use it. A magic briefcase? When I set it over my shoulders, my head was placed inside a triangular assemblage of opposing mirrors, as if inside a kaleidoscope. Suddenly, the contours of my visual field twisted into an intricate play of pathways which opened and multiplied into infinity as I moved around the space.¹ Since then, TorresAlzaga has continued her investigation, with mirrors, magic, and infinities, becoming a master of illusion; her works appear and disappear, they conjure ghosts, and doubles; some have become kinetic, and even cinematographic.

In order to write this text, I proposed that we sit down to chat. The artist invited me to her home. The building where she lives is at the corner of two converging avenues, so her apartment has the shape of a foreshortened triangle: it grows increasingly narrow at the far end, penetrating into the background as if attempting to reach a vanishing point—the renaissance representation of the pictorial infinite. In recent years, her home space has coexisted with the studio, the workshop, the storage room, and even the gallery. Her books, work tables, shelves, papers, drawings hanging on the wall, and her still-packaged artworks--just retrieved from some exhibit-- exist alongside the fetish-objects, collections, findings, all which constitute a very personal environment.

I began to examine the space. I admired her drawings, where with the tip of a fine pencil, the artist reflects upon the philosopher Blaise Pascal, and his *Thoughts*, where he spoke of how perception can fool us: when we stick a finger into a glass of water, it becomes dislocated. In a constant reference to the early years of cinema, which certainly brings to mind the magician Georges Méliès, Torres-Alzaga wills objects into disappearance, or the opposite: she invokes apparitions, accomplishing captivating works, among them the diptych *Sin Título (Untitled, 2014)*. In this piece, a small black square frames the drawing of a hand, while an adjacent identical square, pictures a card; in the middle, there is a thin glass which projects a ghost from one square onto the adjoining one, thus fusing the hand with the card. This work adopts the mechanisms of the kinetic image that preceded the cinema, it brings to mind the optical toys, which at that time, seemed more like magic tricks than the intimations of a seventh art.

My attention was drawn in particular to a small glass and wooden box containing a butterfly: *Sin título (Mariposa #1)/Untitled (Butterfly #1)*, 2009. It was in fact, half a butterfly, split in the middle by a mirror that duplicated it, thus reconstituting the harmony of its symmetry. When one circles around the box, the butterfly disappears. This piece prompted me to retrieve from my bookshelf a short essay I'd read recently, written by

¹ In 2004 Torres-Alzaga presented three briefcases in the SAPS, living together with the “multiple angle” of David Alfaro Siqueiros painted on the walls of the place and the great monumental drawing of anamorphosis by Regina Silveira, who coincided in the space programming.

Georges Didi-Huberman in 2007, which references the “butterfly images.”² The renowned theorist develops a phenomenology of butterflies in order to reflect on the *being* of images and their fleeting nature which, like these fascinating insects, reach our imagination by flapping their wings, and they disappear as prematurely as they arrive. Didi-Huberman focuses his investigation on the palpitating nature of images.

“Like the swinging motion of a door, like the wings of a butterfly, the apparition is a perpetual movement of closing, opening, closing again, and reopening . . . It is a beating of wings, a palpitation. The being and non-being take on rhythm.”³

Far from relegating to a metaphysics that seeks to fix the impermanence of being in abstract concepts, Didi-Huberman tries to reconstruct our perception of images in their most intangible aspect; not via their material supports, or as artistic or cultural products, nor by way of a Structuralist semiotics that seeks to define and dissect them, like butterflies stuck with a pin in the displays of natural history museums. But rather, to identify, in the beating wings of a butterfly, in their dance, in their fragile relation to the real, their brush with our consciousness, their relationship to memory and language, as something unstable, always in the horizon of appearance and disappearance:

“We could almost venture the hypothesis that each fundamental dimension of the image rigorously corresponds to one particular aspect of the life of butterflies: their beauty and infinite variety of forms, of colors (. . .) the paradox of form and formlessness contained in the metamorphosis (. . .) the power of likeness and the traps of mimesis; the senseless squandering of appearances and their fatal alteration; the legendary and phantasmatic value in which the imago is constantly anthropomorphized; the obstinate (a beating across a symmetrical axis) and piercing (closing-opening), and finally erratic movement of the butterfly-image; the fissure that hides in its game of appearance and disappearance; the desire and consummation that manifests before our eyes. . .”⁴

The Greeks represented Psyche, the eternal soul, as a damsel with butterfly wings, and a butterfly always rests alongside Dionysus. Butterflies, for the Romantics, were “animals of our desires and fears.”⁴ In her hypnotic dance of shimmering cloths, Loïe Fuller, revered by Paul Valery, among other poets of the 1930s, did not dress up as a butterfly: she sought

² Didi Huberman, Georges. “La imagen mariposa”. Falenas. An essay about apparition. Barcelona: Mudito & Co, 2007.

³ Op. cit, p.9. ⁴ Ibid., pp.10-11 ⁵ Ibid., p.61. ⁴ Ibid. p.20.

⁴ Night moth type.

rather, the glimmer of an apparition, a psychic glimmer, a confusion in the matter and movement of bodies.⁴ The metamorphosis of woman into butterfly pushed her to the extreme of losing her life like phalaenes,⁵ burning to death after coming too close to night lamps. Much like “butterfly image” described by Didi-Huberman possesses that illusory and captivating quality: “A butterfly, appears only to disappear in an instant;”⁵ the fine and delicate objects that Torres-Alzaga creates emerge in the field of the *trompe-l’oeil*, which supposes being captivated by an illusion. We can identify optical illusion with the apparitions of the psyche and of desire, since they are comparable in subtlety and instability. “Fascination” better expresses the link between psychic emotiveness and visual deception: “fascination is a temporary fixation which holds us visually and then releases us.”⁶



II

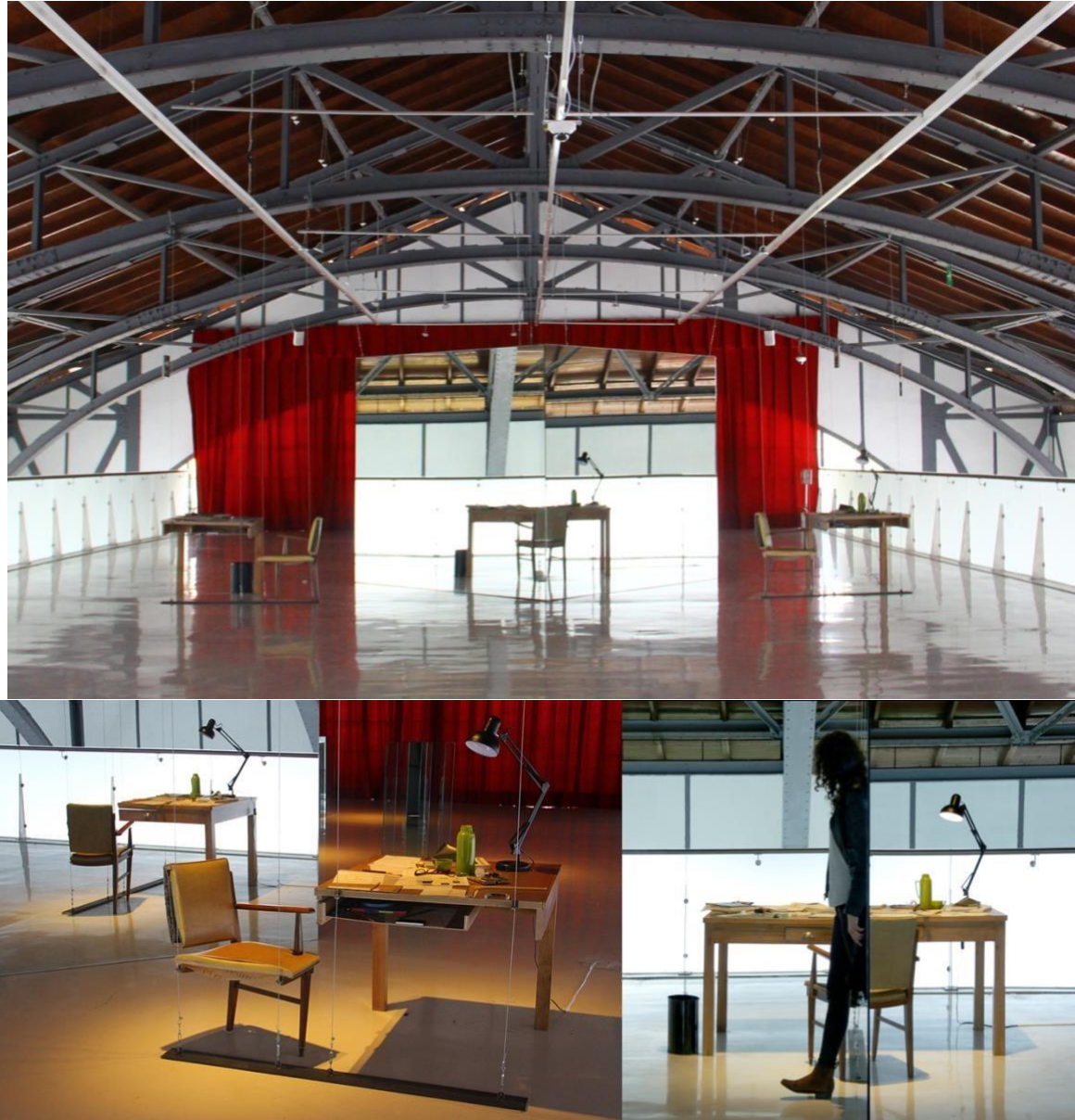
Torres-Alzaga enjoys seducing the spectator, filling her/him with wonder and surprise, and so, she always has a trick under her sleeve. The artist has thoroughly investigated “the way in which the illusory image is fashioned:” mirrors have been her primary allies. Each time, and with increasing subtlety, her works achieve “the magic of a parallel reality.” A

⁵ Ibid., p.9.

⁶ Ibid., p.58.

wellversed magician, Torres-Alzaga knows how to see “reality as a two-fold possibility,” and to study the “fragility of appearances.”¹⁰⁹ This is the starting point for her work. If her previous works evolved from a portable briefcase, to a table, to a display object, and eventually transforming into pieces of furniture, *Entre Actos* (*Between Acts*), presented in 2014 at the Museo Universitario del Chopo, presupposes an entire scene. It is a more complex installation relative to her previous works, in that it involves the spectator in the space of play. Torres-Alzaga assembled *Entre Actos* in the attic of the Museo del Chopo,⁷ just below the pointed, gothic-style pointed ceiling. She hung her red velvet curtain in the back, conjuring a proper ambience for magic. She then took her own desk, complete with all her work tools: rulers, pencils, a coffee cup and thermos, her glasses, as well as some books, sketches and photos—a record of her research—and, as if she had been suspended in a moment of great creative intensity, she took a saw and cut the whole scene in two: even the drawers and the chair were precisely split in half. Each half was placed on opposite sides of the room, fragments hung suspended by fine wires. Just like the magic act *par excellence*, wherein a wooden box enclosing a willing volunteer is sawed in half, cleanly splitting a body in two.

⁷ Quotes taken from personal notes lent me by the artist, and that are part of her reflective process.



The installation is completed by two enormous mirrors, placed perpendicularly, each one facing one half of the desk, nearly converging in the center of the gallery. This piece revealed itself to me like Didi-Huberman's great "butterfly image," insofar as the two mirrors symmetrically figure a pair of butterfly wings, while the body of spectator, at the center of the piece, constitutes the axis from which the mirror/wings take flight. It is only when the spectator stands in the place of the winged body, exactly in the middle of the installation and in between the two mirrors, that the illusion of an integrated whole image

is complete; simultaneously, the subject of this observation disappears from the reflection. *Entre Actos* recomposes in the space of the mirror, the dislocation produced in the “real” space, which is to say, the desk cut in half becomes whole again. The subject/hinge opens his/her arms like a butterfly and discovers, in his/her own body, the symmetry of the piece. With reference to this spectator who occupies “the only position allowed,” Pier Antoni Ruggero writes: [he/she] “instantly perceives that he is privileged. He is struck by an extraordinary illusionistic effect which can only be appreciated from that particular position.”⁸ In any other point in space, when the spectator observes the piece, he or she catches his or her reflection. Yet, when the spectator stands at the center, facing the piece, the total illusion of the integrated desk comes together, but the observer disappears. The logic of the image only exists in the space that we cannot inhabit.

Entre Actos, the artist explains, “is a composition of fragments placed in space to create a possible but illusory moment.” As in cinema, where by means of montage, “one can construct the identity of a person by means of fragments,” or, for instance, as in the film *Indiscreet* (Stanley Donen, 1958), starring Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman,— which TorresAlzaga cites by laying a still of the film on the desk—where two lovers, geographically apart, speak on the phone before sleeping, each lying in their own bed. With a simple trick of montage, the magic of the movies reunites them, in an ‘impossible scene,’ picturing them together, on the same bed, about to fall asleep side by side.

Didi-Huberman explores different theories of symmetry--one of characteristic qualities of butterflies. He refers to Herman Rorschach who in 1921, developed a series of drawings for psychological testing by staining paper with ink and folding it in half, automatically producing “formal symmetries.” The efficiency of Rorschach prints lies in the subject who projects onto them, thus freeing the psyche. Print V is usually identified as a butterfly, and at the same time, as a world split in two. These prints lead us to those created by Yves Klein, who painted naked women tinted with his deep blue. DidiHuberman refers to a drawing by Klein that is a butterfly, its wings formed by the thighs and legs of a woman sitting in a lotus position; in place of the insect’s body lies the dark stamp of her sex, as a center and excision: a vertical cut. “A geometric image is not obtained solely by constructing the homology of the themes situated on opposite sides of a given axis. It takes only a cut to create an axis of symmetry, and cutting means wounding, separating, destroying a little. . . “⁹ We shouldn’t forget that the butterfly “effect” of Torres-Alzaga’s piece is founded precisely on a radical cut.

Just as the observer in *Entre Actos* is corporeally engaged in the creation of the illusion, Didi-Huberman suggests that: “The imago is a matter of visual apparition and, at the same

⁸ Arnaldo Belkin Gallery, located on the third floor of the museum. (editor’s note).

⁹ Ruggero, Pier Antoni. *The eye and the idea (Physiology of vision)*. Barcelona: Paidós Editorial, 1984.

time, bodily experience.”¹⁰ Quoting Heinrich Wölfflin,¹⁴ he claims that “We are the ones who involuntarily animate things. Therein lies an ancestral drive of humanity (. . .). We lend our own image to all phenomena. This is why the exigency of symmetry extends from the constitution of our own body (. . .) symmetry is a condition of our wellbeing.”¹⁵ Anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss made us see that art throughout the ages has been determined by the structure of our body and our movements.

Symmetry comforts, while the effect of asymmetry can provoke psychological malaise, “as though one of our limbs had been mutilated.”¹⁶ For this reason, Didi-Huberman notes: “The symmetry of the butterfly image does not offer us its formal stability,” but rather presents itself like a “mask of a potential adversity, as a threat linked to the formless and to destruction.”¹¹ The same occurs with *Entre Actos*. On the one hand, there is the place of the privileged observer, where the complete and idyllic image is reconstituted—but it is an unstable image, because it depends on a single, fixed point of view. If you move, it becomes displaced: “Symmetry cannot be rigorously conceived except in the horizon of its shattering.”¹² At the moment when the spectator leaves the center and walks in the gallery, his or her ghost is multiplied and trapped on the other side of the mirror, in a kaleidoscopic, asymmetrical, and fragmentary labyrinth.

The peace of the spectator that traverses *Entre Actos* depends on the equilibrium of the image reconstituted by mirrors. As in the frame by frame projection of a film, “a place as fictional as it is real,” opens up, says Torres-Alzaga. She continues: “This project is based on the dividing line between similar but opposite spaces. The reflection or recreation of a fiction with and against the place that the spectator inhabits.”¹³¹⁴ In *Entre Actos*, the body of the spectator is metamorphosed with the piece in order to complete the illusion. And so, the illusion takes flight, with butterfly wings, in a possible world, on the other side of the mirror: unattainable, like the object of desire.

¹⁰ Didi-Huberman, Georges. “The butterfly image”, Op. cit. p. 72 ¹⁴

Ibid. p. 65. ¹⁵ Ibid. p. 69. ¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibid. p. 68.

¹³ Ibid. p.72.

¹⁴ Un published notes of the artista.



* Itala Schmelz (Mexico, 1968). She studied philosophy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). From 2013 to 2018 she was director of Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City. Previously, she directed the Siqueiros Public Art Gallery (SAPS) from 2011 to 2007 and the Carrillo Gil Art Museum (MACG) from 2007 to 2011. She was the director of *EL future más acá* (2003), the first Mexican sci-fi film festival. She was selected as curator of the Mexican Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, where she presented *CordioX*, by artist Ariel Guzik. Schmelz has published her essays on art and visual culture in multiple catalogs and magazines.