

Jorge Macchi, the Surrealist, or Persistence in the Impossible

Inés Katzenstein

One of the first works by Macchi I ever saw—one that has had a lasting impact on me—is, as far as I know, forgotten: a V-shaped branch of a tree whose thickest end was wrapped in an ace bandage of the sort used on an athlete's ankle or wrist. The branch, along with other intervened objects, was exhibited on a shelf as part of a show at the Casal de Catalunya in the early nineties. It looked like an amputated or dead member or, perhaps, a member in the process of healing—or both. Even though it looked like part of a wounded animal, it was still a branch. That idea of vegetation as phantom limb produced a particular disturbance, an unspeakable sense of pity, or perhaps something closer to the horror that prostheses usually incite. It was, in my memory's construction, a scene of vegetable love.

That memory condenses some of the traits of Macchi's work that I still find most appealing: an interest in producing errors that act as jokes and also as triggers of the uncanny, a determination to embody something that escapes logic—his surrealism. The works by Macchi I will discuss here put together an image that is both commonplace and impossible, as stubborn in its will to signify as it is in its resistance to signifying. A mad becoming, Deleuze would say. That sort of madness is, for me, Macchi's most cherished register.

But—and this is the strange thing—Macchi is, as we all know, a serious artist; he is almost scientific both in his interests, which revolve around a very specific type of logical experimentation, and in the control he exercises over language. Furthermore, since his beginnings he has been considered, at least in Argentina, a conceptual artist. A fairly unique case of apparently seamless accord with the reductive aesthetic of neoconceptualism that has dominated the global art scene since the early nineties. What I want to say is that, in Argentina, that madness that is, for me, the defining trait of his most disturbing works has been obscured or covered outright by a language that, in a local context marked by overt distance from the conceptual tradition, is exceptional in its restraint and economy. I won't spend too much time discussing the geopolitical questions concerning Macchi's relationship to the Argentine intellectual and artistic scene, but I do want to propose thinking of Macchi more as a laboratory surrealist than as an overadapted neoconceptualist, if and only if we think of surrealism as a category that refers to—and this qualification is crucial—a rigorous and project-driven strain of the disconcerting. His images, of course, have nothing to do with surrealism understood as the uncertain result of automatism or unbridled invention, but rather as a consequence of observation and of modest experiments in upsetting logic and meaning.

The second work by Macchi that I remember as a powerful experience was—like the branch—an image of an accident. I saw *Vidas paralelas* [Parallel Lives] (1998), one of Macchi's most emblematic works, several years after the forgotten branch. The work consists of two sheets of glass, one next to the other, shattered in the exact same way, resting on a platform on the floor. One looks like the identical reconstruction of an accident that the other had suffered, or perhaps they are the twin outcomes of a shattering that, as if by magic, had split in two. In any case, in this work, like many such works by Macchi, we cannot imagine exactly what happened to produce the object. We might think that the work is a monument to

chance through its impossible repetition, that is, through the negation of its constituent uniqueness. Determination and chance come together here, destroying one another.

In addition to Borges (an obvious and, for that very reason, unnamable influence), my point of reference for understanding this work was the famous accident experienced by Duchamp's *Large Glass*. It is well known that the two parts of that work, one on top of the other as they were being transported somewhere, shattered in the exact same way. Macchi's work reminded me of Duchamp as well because of the common interest in repeating lines drawn by chance (think of works like *Trois Standard Stoppages*). But that movement continued in Macchi's work. Its title, *Vidas paralelas*, injected a dose of animism and romanticized the situation in dialogue with the imperfect parallelism of Félix González-Torres's *Perfect Lovers*. However, here González-Torres's moment of perfect harmony is frozen in a sort of anemic limbo of equality without connection. It was really a double gravestone.

What interested me most about this work was the concentrated sensation of perplexity, the stagnation of the flow of rational thought that the image produces insofar as it does not appear to have been caused by natural events. And it is in that sense of bafflement that I now find the Magrittean chord¹ that I would like to underscore here. This is where Macchi strays from the conceptual tradition² to set off fiction. In these works, there is no "concept" understood as meaning. Instead, the very idea of concept as something recognizable, as something logical, is set aquiver. Macchi uses artifice, even trickery, to confront us with that restlessness, with darkness's mastery of order and meaning; a darkness that is manifested not in subjects but, as in Cortázar, in objects.

Another example: a small cage full of soil. Though "gentle," this is one of Macchi's most disturbing and aberrant images. It looks like the nest of an hornero bird that could not assume its natural form because enclosed in a cage. It's as if there were an excess of bird and no bird at all. There is no metaphor, but there is an extreme sensation of oppression and death. If we think, then, that one of the cores of Macchi's art lies in paradoxical, eloquent, suggestive, yet baffling images of this sort, we understand that his work, especially his work from the nineties, is not that far from one of the ideals to which art in the Argentine context aspired in those years: restoring what, in aesthetic experience, cannot be translated, opposing programmatic rationality, the supposed clarity of a certain neoconceptualism. While their ideals may have been the same, what separated Macchi from the most important Argentine artists of the nineties was an abyss of language and a dogged and categorical refusal to let personal elements make their way into his work.

What matters most, then, is that we understand Macchi as an artist who believes in thinking not as an instrumental or pristine act, not as a tool to impose order, but rather as a power riddled with the darkest and deadliest forces of the unconscious. As curator Manuel Oliveira wrote, his work is constituted by "a series of visually powerful images that makes us less defenseless, though not totally safe [and immerses us in] a state of perceptive fascination

¹ I would like to thank Fabio Kacero for his comments on this point.

² What Macchi takes from conceptual art, basically, is its formal economy and strategic choice of materials and languages.

and breadth of knowledge that allows us to face the complexity of the world around us even if we cannot know or explain it fully.”³

The artist’s relationship with Magritte, one of his idols as a teenager, allows us to think of him in these other terms. That relationship is particularly evident in his watercolors and drawings that make use of collage procedures, where a precise substitution of one thing for another, or metamorphosis of one thing into another, takes place. Macchi confesses, “The drawings I made when I very young were a mix of Roger Dean and Magritte. I loved surrealism, but I gradually came to have negative preconceptions about that language until, luckily, I started drawing with watercolors, which freed me from those ideas and allowed me to pursue that aesthetic.”⁴

Some example: a balloon occupies the place of a globe or the letters “AM” and “PM” cast shadows that fall exactly where they would be at that time of day. Like Magritte’s *Le Paysage fantôme*, which shows the face of a woman with the word “mountain” written across it, Macchi drew a head whose features are the names of seas and oceans. Magritte has *Les Amants* and Macchi has *Cool Love* (1997). The Belgian artist painted a woman whose skin turns into wood and Macchi drew two houses on fire whose flames turn into heads kissing. The Magritte connection is even present in some of Macchi’s lesser known series, like those drawings full of erotic obsessions where breasts hang out of windows or two men’s heads look like battling nipples.

Fictions, inversions, paradoxes, and metamorphosis: everything aims to displace the “good sense” and order of the Idea, of the predictable, of the knowable. But what Macchi really does, the gesture truly his own, is to expand Magritte’s paradoxes, Borges’s impossibles, and Cortázar’s madness into a “real” plane. In their elements and effects, the things in his work are animated by a disorder, by an unprecedented freedom. If Max Ernst said that Magritte’s works were collages “entirely painted by hand”⁵ (the upset effected by collage flattened on to a painting), if Borges and Cortázar operate in the mental intimacy of fantasy, Macchi, in most cases, constructs paradoxical objects entirely in the real world. And that move from idea to three-dimensionality produces an additional estrangement because fiction ceases to be speculative or project driven (as it is in drawing, as it is in painting) in order to be materialized and to participate in the resounding power of actual things. This translation is what gives Macchi’s works a singular brutalism that does not have to do with how they are made, but rather with the extra weight that speculations and anomalies take on in the passage to matter.

This is patently clear in works where light has been solidified, like *Still Song*, a work in which a space has been filled with holes as if shot through by the light effects of a disco ball. Other works that operate in the same direction include *Iluminación* [Illumination] (2012), a sculpture in which the rays cast by different flashlights are solidified in hard cement; the installation *Refracción* [Refraction] (2012), a space with a series of enormous vertical beams that are bent slightly as if the optical effects of light refracting had changed their shape

³ Oliveira, Manuel, “Menos inermes pero no seguros,” in *Jorge Macchi, Anatomía de la melancolía*, Spain, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Xunta de Galicia, 2008, p. 73.

⁴ Conversation with the author, November 2015.

⁵ Clair, Jean, “Le Visible et l’Imprévisible. Sept prolégomènes à un petit traité des tropes Magrítettéens,” in *Retrospective Magritte*, Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1978, p. 34.

permanently. These investigations into how the immaterial operates on the materiality of the world date back to the early nineties, when Macchi expanded mirrors with something like see-through plastic bags as if attempting to outline or enclose their reflections. In these passages from speculation to object or installation, fiction conquers the real and Macchi rarefies the panorama of the existent by displacing the literary tradition that has so nourished him. Attempting the impossible is what animates things.

(Macchi's works where lights and reflections become things remind me of the Magrittean procedure that Foucault speaks of, where the title of the painting affects the painting. The famous *Le soir qui tombe* shows a window with broken panes of glass that looks out onto a landscape where evening begins to fall. In this work, the words of the title have acted on the image physically: night, falling, ceased to be metaphor and broke the glass of a window).

Works like *Reacción* [Reaction] (2011)—a clear glass structure in the shape of a police barricade—make use of another procedure of surrealist inversion. The inversion here consisted of rendering light, fragile, and transparent that which must be visible, undeniable, and physically resistant enough to stop a crowd's "reaction." Counter to the works that turn the effects of light into something materially heavy, here something usually metal becomes ethereal. This is a version of what Michel Foucault, in his study of Magritte, called "substantial assimilations" between images.⁶ "For me, that work was an invisible and fragile barrier, I mean, the exact opposite of a barricade," Macchi explains. "That's where the omnipresent paradox was. I didn't think anything would happen. I really thought people would be too afraid of the work breaking to approach it. But they did."⁷ Writer Matilde Sánchez, the author of the novel *Los daños materiales* [Material Damages], inadvertently swung her purse too close to the work and destroyed it. "*Reacción* was the polar opposite of a Duchampian *ready-made*. It was an over-constructed piece of perfect craftsmanship," Sánchez wrote after the accident. "In any case, it was a *ready-crash*: the work contained the process it unleashed. Modestly, I believe that I was following its orders."⁸ The work, because quasi-virtual, announced its own imminent destruction: a glass barricade only exists as work of art insofar as it manifests its radical uselessness and fragility. The accident (in potential) was the heart of the work. The broken glass that had appeared first in *Vidas paralelas* and then in *Buenos Aires Tour* (2003) irrupted to shatter the piece's static control, to challenge its being as thing, and to push it into pure occurrence.

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Macchi's works, like Magritte's, are not constructed by means of a process of free invention in which "the surrealist" is what goes furthest from the existent. His procedures, rather, consist of observing reality and then betraying it in the direction of fiction. Exaggerated, taken beyond the limits of its physical capacities, reality is goaded into a mystery in which it already participates—and so we see the difference between invention and fiction. Fiction,

⁶ Foucault, Michel, *Esto no es una pipa. Ensayo sobre Magritte*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Eterna Cadencia, 2012, p. 58. (English title: This Is Not a Pipe).

⁷ Conversation with the author, September 2015.

⁸ Clarín.com, 1/26/11, "Crónica de un daño insólito en Proa: 'Ya soy una enemiga del arte.'"

which is essential to the Macchi of the objects and installations discussed here, is not at the service of invention but, rather, operates on the basis of observation of the mysteries that form part of the commonplace.

In recent years, Macchi has returned to painting after some twenty years; in the early nineties, he began to expand the spectrum of materials, supports, and scales used in his work and, in that process, stopped painting. In the framework of this text, I would like to point out something strange about this return. In his paintings, what Macchi does is paint images that seem to come from photographs he has taken. By which I mean, there is no fiction in them, there is no transformation of reality, just an alteration of scale, texture, and context. Here, the images' passage to painting is the main source of estrangement in a procedure that represents the inverse of the passage in his objects and installations. If what's at stake in the objects and installations is a leap into the impossible, all Macchi does in the paintings is document an observation; the estrangement is located solely in the representation.

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La señalada [The Signaled] (2015), is a clear example of the new austerity of procedures that Macchi has recently found in painting. The scene represented is a rustic wood double window with a translucent curtain; though we see the image from the outside, we do not see the interior, but a reflection in the window's glass of a hilly horizon line that would be behind the photographer or the viewer. Because the window's two panes are slightly askew, the reflection of the horizon does not line up. There is, then, a mystery in the image, in the difference between one half and the other, in the impossibility of seeing inside. And a second mystery in the choice to paint such a mundane image, one with such a simple strangeness.

Macchi's pictorial phase differs, then, from the rest of his production because, in it, the artist's intervention on things is so minimal. Macchi has conquered a space in which he no longer needs effects. The mystery is there, in the things themselves, and painting emphatically returns him to the surrealist tradition.

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One would have to be too "simple" to believe that thought is a simple act, clear unto itself, and not putting into play all the powers of the unconscious, or all the powers of nonsense in the unconscious. Paradoxes are recreational only when they are considered as initiatives of thought. They are not recreational when they are considered as "the Passion of thought," or as discovering what can only be thought, what can only be spoken, despite the fact that it is both ineffable and unthinkable.⁹

⁹ Deleuze, Gilles, *The Logic of Sense*, London, Athlone Press, 1990, p. 74.