

The Art of Giantfighting

Stephen Daly

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Art frequently offers us the possibility of slipping toward a vision of ourselves which produces sarcasm, which supports and even provokes smiles, and, precisely for this reason, art, with its ability to involve us personally, takes up in a profound way the ideas that it addresses. This is the case with the works of Stephen Daly that are on view in the Exposition Hall of the Polytechnic University of Valencia.

In these art works, everything seems to originate from some sort of permutation, emanate from some change in position with respect to the everyday logic followed by forms, beings and objects. Everything seems to have been moved, shifted to another course; perhaps because fundamentally these things concern us, we are drawn into a deviation with respect to our own position, with respect to the role we are responsible for, our role as spectators. These mutations are not due only to an innovation in the visual resources that Daly applies in this work, since this does not belong to the category of retinal symbols. The transformations originate from the arousal of an expanded perception, of an awkward conscience of our spatial being thanks to movement in gestation. On the one hand, the artist causes us to begin a physical trip through a territorial geography delineated by the effusive character of his works; and on the other, he develops an agile semantic current, a subtle conceptual displacement facilitated, in many cases, by his invocation of irony, a resource that operates in two ways, either by a brief change of reference, a change of cadence, or by bringing into relief evidence that in this review translates as the fundamental condition of contemporary human beings, evidence that makes us feel concerned, implicated, and represented in these works and that, after all, provokes a slight smile from the person who recognizes himself as he contemplates the work, and who, in some imperceptible manner, is changed.

In this way, Daly's works show how irony is developed in the tense ambivalence and permutability of reality, and his synthetic image, between subject and object, between concept and its physicality, all [of these] terms structured and determined in accordance with three essential tensions that are transformed into the protagonists of Daly's work. These are worked out in terms of three ideas: (1) between reality and its own image we find a new conception of the space-time binomial; (2) between subject and object is produced a revolution in our role as spectators; and (3) between the palpable and the intelligible we find a sense of language. We will analyze these three movements one by one.

Art: Between Reality and Its Image

The works of Stephen Daly make up a series of way stations on the route between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional. They are drawn sculptures, and not just drawings from which material might jut out, an inversion that is achieved thanks to the employment of an expansive force that makes his elements explode from all possible angles, into all possible spaces, with a fluid and organic movement, but also mechanical — an explosion by which the artist produces an integration of the enclosed space and the intermediate spaces in which we, the spectators, also feel ourselves involved. The movement is aerial, physical, and psychic, but also conceptual.

The spreading and enlarging of space makes the borders of the works disappear, perhaps invalidating the correlation between the volume [of the piece] and the emptiness around it, and almost immediately we are drawn in: we are included as parts of space and time, we are an effect of the [work's] context. Since we ourselves are part of its totality, our perception is not mediated by the measurement of some [separating] distance, which, in a strictly visual way, might have obliged us to find an exact point from which to try to correctly appreciate the work.

In this way, Daly's drawings are sculptures which import their power from the realm of the three-dimensional. For this reason, as we move through the space of the gallery, we cannot avoid the sensation that in the emptiness we can find elements which have been expelled from the work by centrifugal forces, and that the supports [of the pieces] have become practically invisible since they do not uphold any figure-background gestalt. Daly's works produce, throughout, an atmosphere, an extension of the context thanks to which the gallery or exhibition space, far from being a white or neutral cube, becomes a space generated by the pieces, convincing us that we belong to this way of being, that we are an element in the context: we feel ourselves as one more component that has been expelled from the pieces, one more part of their framework. In this way, the space finds, in a strange psychic geometry, its own vocabulary put into motion, finds its own place in time.

Still, as Daly's works unfurl in space, they attract space to themselves and concentrate it; they enclose us and convert us into moments in almost primordial time, into a gesture from that time. Its formal correctness all comes down to a reduction of inscrutability to its common denominator: that we humans constitute a space-time enigma. In this enigma the sculptures-turned-drawings, almost newborn, join together in as a kind of ironic response to the metric spirit of time. The power of the images is iconic here. Their presence is absorbing. They move between eternity and the fleetingness of the quotidian event, because, through them [these images] the art develops like some creation of symbols that furnish an order that goes beyond the dichotomy between the permanent and the provisional — because these images take their places on the very line that is the tension between both elements. Tension is constructed as instability, and as temporal instability. Daly's works seem to possess eternal features that characterize any icon, but they are tugged by their behavior [poses/attitudes/postures] and by objects which belong to the ephemeral and to temporal instability. This articulation is achieved excellently through the active character of his pieces.

Sculpture is, in Daly's case, the union and concentration of space as action-space, where something seems to be happening continuously. The pieces are expanding in every direction, their characteristics are seen to be reinforced by the expressive properties of the materials used by the sculptor, and they are altered, sometimes, by coloration, and by marking different degrees of intensity in one's perception. The phallic precedence of verticality in some cases induces an apparent elevation that leaves the pieces unconnected to the soil. The elements pushed to the fore unfasten the works from the walls and nullify their bases [supports]. The bulbous perforations make us penetrate the walls, pry into the hidden aspects of the pieces. Every activity is generated in this transmission of signals from one space to another, like

choreographic action in the womb of emptiness that allows the movement that fills it, that changes it in time, that gives it continuity and, at the same time, inaugurates the presence of an opposite sign, since, in the face of evanescence of the instant, time is offered the possibility to manifest itself, to be transformed into something permanent by virtue of this materialization.

By expansion, spatial vitality, temporal coagulation, Daly's works manifest a particular treatment of the gravitational properties of a universe woven of energy, space where both the microcosm and macrocosm are found to be implicated in a kind of metaphysical or unified field theory in which both exchange their respective values.

Art: Between Subject and Object

The sensuality and eroticism implicit in many of Daly's works are framed in a stately or priestly manner: the images of his subjects remain static, almost impassive, while they set in motion the entire surrounding space. Thus, the figures are not archetypes, despite their almost totemic appearance, rather they are marks that subtly record every individual complex of psychic traits based on our tendency to develop processes of identification.

Between abstract simplification and a characterization overflowing with detail, Daly's figures are concentrated within each other's gaze: spatial, almost palpable, lost at the disappearing point — which forces us to look in the direction that their eyes indicate. Sometimes that gaze catches us, sometimes it seems to bump against itself, but always it is measured with respect to some kind of horizon that we do not seem to be able to manage to perceive, something invisible. Those gazes, almost tangible in space radically transform the vision theorized in traditional perspective drawing, since it puts us into perspective, as if we were one more of these objects that surround the figures or which belong to them, that are found absolutely integrated with them. Because of this fact, Daly's works manifest all their power, showing that, at the same time, they are fragile and vulnerable, just as we are. To relieve ourselves of the position of being those who are observed, we tend to move, but with this we do little more than slip toward the strategy that the figures themselves have adopted.

The subjects of Daly's art works are oscillating spatial entities whose poetry is disassociated from any rough or serious tone, without subtracting conceptual profundity from the pieces. The appeal is the contact with the subtle shifts that produce irony. Perhaps because of this, the figures possess a mysterious enchantment and the magic of fetishes, and they manifest, all at once, a tension that is not exerted by explicitly stated violence caused by the rupture of harmony. The figures do not devour each other by means of spatial condensation, and neither do they have an influence on the idea of some three-dimensional volumetric form, but rather they affirm their existence by their isolation, by an autonomy whose power is extracted from their integration and involvement in external space, an autonomy that discovers its limit in the action of another piece. In this way, the figures appear to be radically isolated, alone, incapable of communication in the middle of the era of global communication. This loneliness bestows upon them a kind of phantasmagoric character.

Between the real, imagination and fantasy, beyond any combinations involving reality, Daly's sculptures develop a satirical philosophy of impotence in which his beings are found trapped between sexuality and collapse, between serenity and the innocence of decadence. While they manifest an ordinary longing for life, they show a metaphysical anguish caused by isolation, like a person who seems to be condemned to life as a prisoner. His figures are shown so isolated that they don't seem to be even joined to themselves, or with themselves, because they are not even spatial

concentrations, rather each is an expanding scatter of spatial values. Individuality here is as ambiguous and uncertain as we, on a daily basis, feel our lives to be. Because of it, Daly's works operate between analysis and synthetic schematization in the heart of a destabilizing discourse — not by being public statements of criticism, but more by showing a serene and almost invisible threat: that which allows us to see what is behind our backs as we contemplate our images in the mirror. Each one of his figures reveals a specific character granted by his original nature, but, at the same time, each is generalized so that it permits us to be able to find some points of identification within the hidden corners of our psyches. Our encounters with these figures are characterized by intimacy: shameless, they hint to us attitudes that unmask the condition of contemporary man and woman. Thus, Daly's work is not created with the idea of changing the world, but it does manage to provoke in us a small dislocation — and we are the parties responsible for including or not including variants in the constellations of reality. Therefore, in his sculpture we find vestiges of things human, vestiges that find, between our modern society with many modes of communications and the tribal and primitive, a core held strangely in common. Perhaps because of this commonality, Daly's works seem to be like an ethnographic collection: they reveal to us an essential man with his material culture, but seen from another perspective that ends of being closer to how we absorb our memory than to a random sample of things drawn from any memory bank. For this reason Daly breaks away from a merely historical point of view and from one structured by linear time, thus giving his pieces a sense of vital contemporaneity.

Man and his objects. In Daly's works object and subject are found to be strangely fused with a structured simplicity whose most complex features are interwoven in a taste for details, in the diversity of material elements, in the presence of the ordinary in the heart of the abstract outlining of the figures. The tension between subject and object finds its resolution by rejecting eclectic anecdotalism in order to address itself to an essentiality that makes the figures timeless, and at the same time contemporary. Daly's figures are like body structures whose tectonics is similar to that of the objective universe which appears next to them and which belongs to them physically and in daily life. As hybrids of object-mechanics and animal nature, Daly's men and women do not annex themselves to the objects in the manner of prostheses, but rather by continuity with them.

If, as affirmed by Bischof, the order of perceived space is based in systems of spatial motor orientation and if it cannot be understood without these, Daly's work shows, with all its richness, our ability to question the simple retinal image in order to thrust ourselves into the perception of more complex signs; it does not content itself with just filling our vision. In this way, it is impossible for us to passively consume images, and we begin to experience the reactivation of all our senses, perhaps caused by the operation of synesthesia.

To the extent that the sculptures touch us, vie with us, look at us, they compel us to find our own response, to work with them to formulate the questions that they are based on, asking for explanations of our daily experience, breaking our habitual routines and challenging our perception. Their space, becomes more real than our own, confirms for us our image and causes us to reevaluate our acquired habits of perception. After all, we finish up looking at ourselves, in a task as illusory as some of Daly's sculptures, but with an ironic tinge and even with that narcissistic gaze which shifts our role as passive observer and allows us to become the one who feels he is being observed and analyzed, causing a reaction, a reactivation (more profound than apparent) of our feelings, since in this we gamble with our own individual psyche, our identity.

Art: Language, Languages

Daly's sculptures awaken us from the sleepiness of ordinary communication. Not only the isolation to which we have already alluded, but also his invented typographies which are structured like chaotic manifestos that are expelled as if by

a puff of air, typographies that plunge us into a sea of silences and of questions concerning the possibility of any exchange of meanings by means of speech and sound. In these sculptures the world is not presented as rigorously regulated by some form of spatio-temporal measuring, but there are instead combinations of elements with linguistic remittances which present us that enigma capable of awakening emotions and contradictions in the spectator. These elements are like visual epigrams that open into a complex and personal labyrinth full of associative references made up of symbols that are resistant to any form of linear reading. Let us imagine a three-dimensional reading, not composed of letters, but with the same kind of abstraction as these, that could be followed in any direction and whose meaning was not conferred beforehand. We are speaking about a proto-language or a post-language, composed of an iconography both strange and precise — such are Daly's symbols.

All the power of these symbols is manifest in the heart of those blurred constellations that prevent the eye from resting in space, in those overflowing fountains of meanings and diagrams, a metaphor for our own world, sensory and lively, disorderly and chaotic. Because of this, the "words" in Daly's sculptures are a riddle in the form of a puzzle-object. We are the ones responsible for putting together the reality of the discourse in the puzzle by means of a lexicon in which the tension between the equivocal and the utterly precise, far from disappearing, is brought into play until it yields to a new linguistic origin whose foundation is solipsistic, it is built on the transitory condition of the human being, a being that dissolves in language.

In this way, Daly's iconography does not designate a field of action beyond reality, but rather it rests upon a kind of reality in an almost embryonic state, a universe still infested by imagination within the womb of a general critique of knowledge, of the categorization of the world we create from language and which generates nonexistent things. Furthermore, this iconography deals with a preference for the flow of attitudes, of associations more metonymical than metaphoric, projections that reveal the movability of time beyond linear sequencing, beyond the straight and from left to right directionality of our writing and of our own reading process. For this reason, the language in the sculptures of Daly becomes independent of its typographic form and it sounds and transforms itself into a live element, in the embryo of other possible worlds.

These "letter" bodies, these body-objects are like a spatial and chaotic spider web used to organize new cosmoses to suit the fancy of every one, of free association, with the connotative dominating the denotative, with a referential promiscuity which allows Daly to produce a radical shift in the nervous system of planetary communications with but a tiny change of course, with a plastic modification whose manifestation seeks to generate a different man, a man who shows the need of new modes of communication for an altered society, one more open to creativity.

All in all, the spectator, we the spectators, can be neither passive nor impartial in the face of Daly's works, beginning the very moment in which we find ourselves dislocated or in which we are trapped in some form of ineffability. Incapable of proffering coherent symbols, we convert ourselves, by means of space-time change, into the narration of Daly's signs, into that which they recount, since they depend on our free association, but also we become the creators of their referents, and of our own world.

Epilogue

Between space and time, between reality and its image, between text and hypertext, and beyond the subject and its submission to language, we find the construction of the individual as a constant which, in an explicit way (although ineffable in many aspects), surpasses any possible syntax. This is a question of the creation of ourselves. Iconography,

iconology, lexical text. Far from the associative properties of the signifier, the meaning itself, and the referent, and in order to mark the semiotic charge [load] in the emergence of a new sensibility, Daly's works make us distrust any deployment of our instrumental reason. These sculptures, based in the qualitative, reject giantfighting about numbers, resist any numerical measuring.

In this era of revolution in communication technology, we, who are more isolated than ever, we who are the probable producers of all possible forms of solipsism, may need art more than ever in order to open a kind of communication for daily life that is more tactile, more frank and free, and more deeply creative. In comparison, language, our language, that which structures this text, may be no more than a simple babble. That new kind of communication is made explicit in this show.