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## *How a Tadpole Becomes a Frog*

Belated Aesthetics, Politics, and Animated Matter:  
Toward a Theory of Artistic Research

1

Central to the inquiry into knowledge has always been the principle of skepticism. Unlike ancient skepticism, which was based on the variety of sensible appearances, modern skepticism—at least since Montaigne and Hume—has revolved around the status of relations inside understanding: the need to understand not only what passes through understanding but also what forbids understanding by withdrawing sense. Here a new interest in the non-transparency of language appears, in its incapacity to fulfill the task of expression and communication. And this produces a paradox: the relevance of grasping the reverse of knowledge, and the role played both humor and fiction as practitioners of (non)sense. To ask not how knowledge is produced, but what supports the myth of a language capable of expressing this, is one of the possible tasks of a documenta where genres are inextricably mixed with their opposites, where the strong perlocutionary effect of the “maybe” is ascribed to a strong affect: the need to understand.

To inquire into knowledge implies the effort to formulate—through logics and languages that surpass disciplines—how inextricable relations among things, language, matter, form, sense, are possible. It means to account for the terms, the possibilities as well as the circumstances, in which the principles that associate the animate with the inanimate, or objects with memory, or animals with other animals, or seeds with art, or theory with the logics of politics, or poetry with knowledge, occur. And therefore it cannot come as a surprise that imagination is a central principle in the invention of the knowledge that takes place in art—a task that does not mimic an activity of academia, but that, in an excessive and subversive way, produces time and space for it, constituting a new “culture.” The main trait of fiction and imagination is their potential failure. They do not serve as solid ground for a speech act; they are an interference in the logic of an intentional assertion of meaning. Art has retained this inversion of the relationship between meaning and saying as a way to overcome the traps of consciousness, the transcendental principle that rules the modern conception

of the individual, that defines the political as an unambiguous text marked by intention of meaning and able to produce and reproduce a very definite sense of empathy. This exercise of accepting the riddle of ambiguity, the constant alteration of the relations between matter and words, time and meaning, defines a research manner that calls for a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact, as well as the inventory of monologues produced by serious forms of meaning.

And this is how the “maybe” comes into play. The “maybe” is a non-concept; it is a modifier. It denotes the attempt to introduce a difference into the relations that define knowledge, the limits of language and the event of thinking in art. At first sight, it could be mistaken for a noun, indicating disenchantment, a relativist position. Yet soon, positivity creeps back in; the “maybe” is the verbal expression of a movement. It names a tension, a state of imagination aiming toward the potential reorganization of the structure of the known and those who think they know. The “maybe” is the emblem of attention, a positive form of privation—the privation of certainty, of the statement that forms a conclusion—that introduces not only fiction but a dimension of theatricality, since it puts all elements into play. So rather than a quest for the void, the dance introduced by the “maybe” can be taken as a journey that introduces us into the realm of artistic research as an active reconsideration of certain representations of knowledge in the context of art. By asking, “What is the reverse of the known?” the form of inquiry that takes place in art amounts to an intuitive grasp of a philosophical and political problematic that defines not only what culture is but what it may be in the future.

“Artistic research” is an awful term; it is confusing in its similitude to “research” as we know it in academic fields. However, this misunderstanding produces an interesting awareness of what is proposed by its utterance. This conceptual diptych does not compromise any of its particulars. More than anything, it “entertains” a paradox: the possibility of a non-deliberate system or discipline at the core of the deliberate ones. “Research” here does not name the embodiment of any particular form of academic training, but the gesture of placing the “maybe” at the core of the real. And



Juana Martha and Julia Isidrez  
*Untitled*, 2011  
Ceramics  
27.5 × 28 × 33 cm; 40 × 26 × 35 cm

this causes something very simple to occur: knowledge vacillates. This permanent oscillation between positioning us here—isolating some features of the real, performing representation, giving form to matter—and, at the same time, taking us faraway from the present time, is what I understand by “artistic research.”

The “maybe,” then, is a marker, a tool to register these plausible operations that art makes from the inside of knowledge: matter, language, images, form . . . all tilting from the inside. This is, in other words, a different way of naming the challenge that art poses to the problem of coherence, to the possibility of responsiveness, to demonstration, and therefore to institutional legitimacy. This oscillating movement embodies an ongoing performative speculation about ways of affecting and being affected, about ways of naming—a language, a place, a time. The viewer is then obliged to find a language, to imagine a place, to conceive a time, and to surpass the identification with all of these—and at the same time produce a *faraway* from all of it.

This vacillation—caused by the artistic method of conveying research into the real, into an artwork—has the virtue of perceiving



Gustav Metzger  
*Untitled*, 1945–59  
 Chalk pastels on paper  
 46 × 51 cm

Right:  
 Horacio Larrain Barros  
 El Tofo: 800 m altitude. A small bird  
 called *cometocino* lands on the machine  
 that measures evaporation at the weather  
 station (10/06/84)

the unknown without its being transmitted into communication by the superficial sociality of the discourse. To refract the unknown without syntaxes, without the movement of displacing the known and replacing it with a new known or the other known: this momentary forgetting of the syntaxes implies a momentary forgetting about learning—that is, it can carry the unknown into a form, a formulation, that will allow the inconceivable to be conceived. And in not knowing about syntax, it is imaginable that the topology of the subject could be another, and thus in its nature able, if only for a second, to listen to a plant, an animal, or a drawing. And so the “maybe” comes also to name the possibility of discovering unsuspected positions between the animate and the inanimate as well as among the many forms of life; an imagination capable of conceiving an act of knowledge among those who live beyond language.

This simple, tantalizing vacillation is the opposite of the narcissism of the re-institutionalization of knowledge and culture that transforms artworks into cultural products, and exhibitions into ideological demarcations of experience. It is also the opposite of the demand of contesting acculturation with the demand of art to be significant, to deliver what we can call a situation of reading, extenuating meaning and memory to the point of a sterile void.

The “maybe,” therefore, is not a lack of certainty, but is a virtue. Even if this reading of the notion may appear completely abstract due to the refusal to engage in an analysis of the concept in favor of presenting it as an intuition, the fact is that the “maybe” has the virtue of giving itself the possibility of reversing order from inside order, language from its inside, power from its core. This murmuring doubt is needed in order to challenge all forms of institutional sufficiency that populate culture and lodge comfortably in the grammar of common sense. If knowledge is not to be owned, not to be produced, it is also not to be distributed and consumed. Intelligence, then, needs to take another form in language, another symbolic form that credits its function in art and in the social besides a vulgar play with the eloquence of the industry—a play that has its origin in impatience, in gaining quickly and effectively a language to grant art the role of an interlocutor. If art could gain a language of universal pragmatism, it would then achieve a communicative force and power in the social, a form of consent and dissent. However, one might ask whether this excess of speech is not sweeping away some propositional instances needed to think further about the significance of art for life.

So the “maybe” is a virtue, a doubt capable of taking the form of a dramaturgy inside a context where art occurs every five years, *documenta*, a manifestation of the act of disowning knowledge. To disown knowledge is completely different from refusing it—as all sorts of totalitarianisms do. To disown knowledge is not an absence; it is not ignorance that is praised here. It is the presence of the undone, of the still possible. And this enacting the possible is knowledge imagined not as a product but as an event or, even better in the context of art, an advent, a manifested form of ideas that do not find a stable meaning but have significance. This knowledge, difficult to express, difficult to present as a new science of the creative, able to enter both political life and commercial



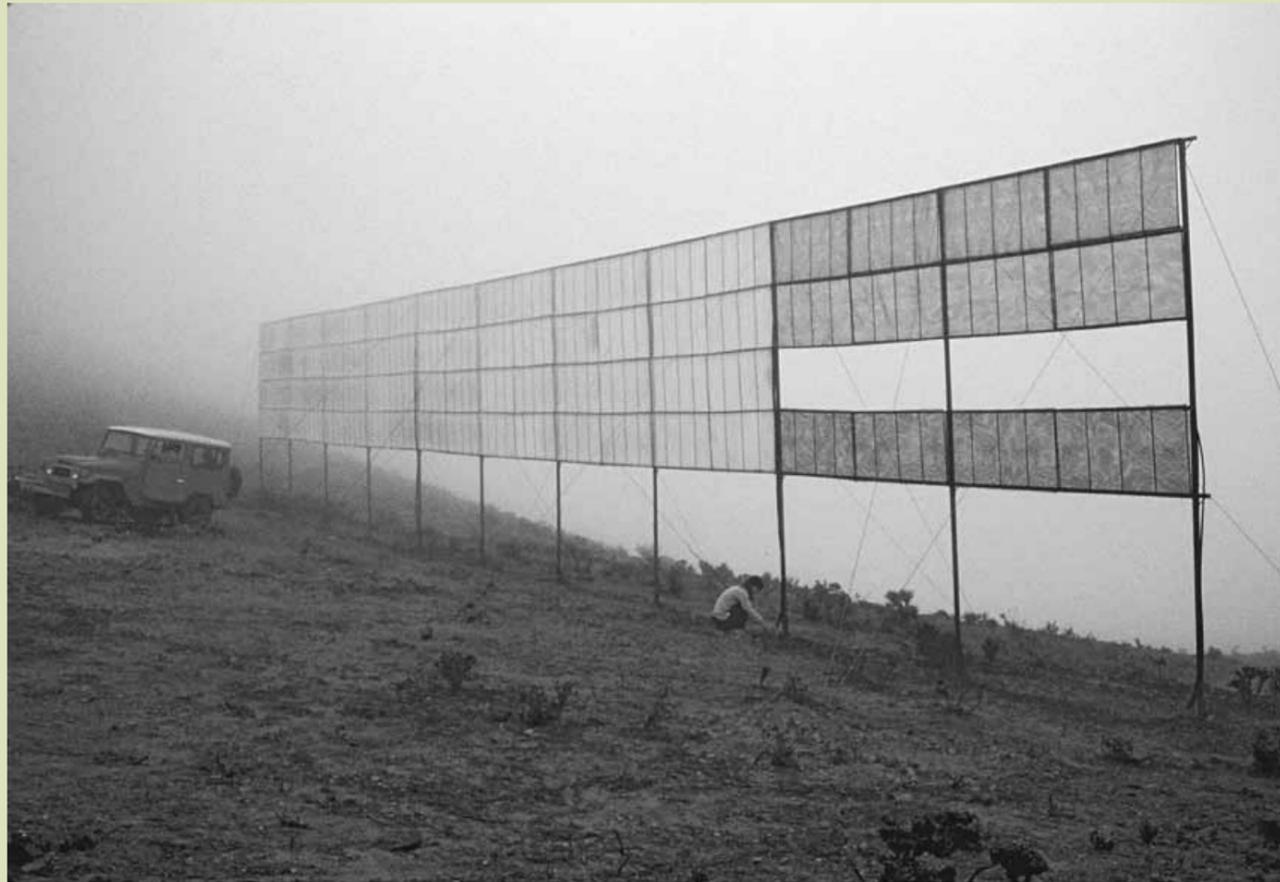
circuits, is a function that provides clues toward a mystery, that is: how to live in a groundless world.

In *Notes to Literature* (1958), Theodor Adorno states that the essay is the form of writing that best suits thinking, since its attribute is to be groundless, not limited by historical transmission or etymology. “Groundless” is the opposite of “motionless.” And therefore, in deciding what text could accompany an exhibition driven by an inquiry on the importance of artistic research, and on its politics, the *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* notebook series possesses an adequacy in relation to the project that surpasses that of the assignment or the task normally asked from a text. The notebooks are as much part of the movement, of the research, as all the other elements active inside the exhibition, artistic or not. Notes are unmannerly, or post-disciplinary, to use the words of academia. Notes are “maybe” texts—not fragments, not in a relation of weakness to any whole, just not yet at the service of illustrating any argument or philosophical conclusion known in advance. Using the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, we could say that they are primary wisdom, primary wisdom being intuition, “while all later teachings are tuitions.”

Notes, like art, are prolegomena, the possibility of a time that is always preliminary, of a language that maintains itself partially unknown, outside the realm of mediation. The preliminary-ness suspends in order to allow the subject and the social to find not only a voice but a tonality.

ii.

The “maybe” also implies that method is not at work or, better said, that the method is not a method yet but can become one. Imagine a movement, a force, traversing the whole project, its materials. It is probable that only at the end will you see some sort of method at work, something that only a posteriori one could call a method. The principles at work emerge through the diverse logics, the materials, artistic or discursive, the languages. This is completely different from a tactic; if the inquiry is a genuine one, a space is produced in which all the elements can name themselves, rather than being called up in advance, by sitting at a table and drawing up a plan. There is an important distinction to be made between hypothesis and intuition. To say that an exhibition is neither driven by a concept nor has a hypothesis is not equal to simply praising the process per se and accepting that the different movements produce a result and that unpredictability is a value in itself. An exhibition of the scale of *dOCUMENTA* (13) starts with guiding themes. Notice that a theme is also different from a subject. These guiding themes could be called intuitions, following Emerson’s definition. An intuition is not an epidemic feeling; it has a history, it appears when certain conditions, the reception of certain artworks, readings, ideas, views, etc., have already occupied our minds. However, a hypothesis and an intuition are two



Horacio Larrain Barros  
El Tofo: Portezuelo. Installed at 8:05  
am (26/02/82)

Right:  
Horacio Larrain Barros  
El Tofo: peak. *Eulychnia spinibarbis*  
(2/09/83)

very different things. A hypothesis requires evidence and must state what constitutes that evidence. In the case of an exhibition it states, for example, the selection process, the choices, which could be understood as a matter of collecting the evidence—artworks, but of course also documentary materials—that determine the working premises, that are able to reinforce the statement at the origin of the display but also of the commissioned texts, etc. An intuition—let’s say artistic research, that is, the way artistic inquiry has created a space inside art for thinking, for philosophy to live longer—does not require—one could even say, does not tolerate—evidence, but rather an understanding. So an intuition places a demand on us, not only to inquire further into it but also to find a way to make it understandable. An intuition does not belong to the realm of the merely subjective; it has a function that surpasses the personal, even if it is true that one of its qualities is partiality. An intuition is nothing but partial and therefore has no claims to universality or neutrality; in other words, it is the opposite of a principle, a norm, a rule, a premise.

This distinction between the not-knowing of a hypothesis and the not-knowing of intuition helps us to understand why a project like dOCUMENTA (13) is not a thesis exhibition. The importance here is placed on listening more than on writing, listening



to those elements that have a “unworldly” eloquence. The project is placed both inside and outside the language game. In one of his lectures, the German philosopher Christoph Menke referred to Adorno’s idea of imagining a taste capable of stating and hating itself simultaneously—that is, capable of producing an identification with the viewer and, at the same time, being able to surpass it. This image is useful when one recalls the absence of a method, for example, or the notion of intuition versus the hypothetical. The whole project can be seen as a language that did not exist previous to the exhibition and is capable at the same time of emerging and elucidating many aspects and questions—the memory of matter, the relationship between historical and ahistorical time, the number of wisdoms that inform what we call knowledge, the many intelligences that constitute life and their intra-activity, the role of the disciplines that inhabit art, like art history or philosophy, the million forms of fiction and meaning emerging from it. The exhibition can produce a cognitive situation where to grasp these questions, instead of translating them using ordinary criteria in order to produce an “opinion” on the matter, can make all these epistemic relationships turn, can set them in motion again. This is a journey in skepticism, or an understanding of criticality in the field of art.

It is complex because it does not facilitate any conclusions; it is not possible, in such a context, to “arrive at any conclusion” regarding any of the guiding themes mentioned. The “we” of a civil society based on consensus needs to disappear from the arguments or show itself vulnerable to suspicion. To return to Adorno, in order to care again for civil society, art, as well as its institutions, should conceive itself as a community capable of “hating itself,” so that it can constitute itself for culture and go beyond the dream of arriving at any form of consensus through it. One can accept, skeptically, that art is both norm and exception, and not part of what can be regulated. It is also possible to imagine that the interest in the question of animality, or in the question of the memory of objects, relates to a struggle about how to bring the world back to life from an angle different from just the judiciousness of the social-theory perspective. A bold desire to overcome the hyperbolic separateness of realms of reality without falling back into a variation of idealism, or into a conceivable animism, points to an eloquent form of after-modernity theory.

With the increasing velocity in the age of technology, knowledge is conceived under the aegis of a dominion. Concepts have become a material, and the concern regarding “having a concept” to work from has too often turned into a question of possessing a thing. This



Horacio Larrain Barros  
El Tofo. Curtain-type fog collectors (19/09/92)

new materialism of the immaterial cannot, though, be contested by dissidence, since the very concept of dissidence is part of the same system. This cognitive trade runs in parallel with the blind strategy of a mind devoted to the old values of resistance that are retold from inside the system where the fantasy of an outside is continuously re-created. Nothing but fiction is able to escape this logic.

Here it is useful to return to the question of intuition, to the reception of the sensuous that demands a form of understanding but that, at the same time, remains partial. How is this condition of being partial to be read in a productive and critical manner? In his introduction to Adolfo Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel* (1940), Jorge Luis Borges writes that the future of the novel is the detective genre. He addresses two main traits of the genre that support his statement: first, the production of clues; second, the existence of a mystery. The clues maintain a relationship with the mystery and are produced as an antecedent to its resolution. Yet they are not essentially connected with the mystery, nor even are they connected to one another; it is the mind that reads them as clues, that sees what may be a relationship. They produce an understanding of the mystery, of the mystery, being mysterious, and they are partial to the very limit of the notion. All the fragments together may reveal a form of knowledge regarding the mystery, but they are never equivalent to it. The status of the clue is interesting, because a clue is different from information and it is not yet a form of knowledge. It is an epistemological entity, because it acts in knowledge, but you cannot define it except as a clue. The clue alludes to a basic expectation of fulfillment—the clues are there to solve the mystery. This is just an assumption, since nothing says they necessarily will; their presence is an acting of intelligence in the game of fiction. But it is the mystery that activates all elements, that keeps the dance in motion. The relationship that the guiding themes and the intuitions have with the whole that is DOCUMENTA (13) can be read in a similar way, as clues hinting at a resolution of a mystery.

iii.

This question of the clue allows for the introduction of another notion: memory and its role in the development of art theory over the past decades. Equal to the importance of gaining a notion of knowledge that is freed from the perils of a language of production and trade, is the task of returning memory to the realm of imagination. The history and the role of taste—not only as a social tool but also as an entity that embodies the highest danger for a judgment based solely on consensus, that is, the equivocal—has provoked an intriguing shift toward another faculty of the mind: memory. Also equivocal, memory can, however, be more subject to training, tamed by a good method. The way in which language is conceived is crucial. This new objectivism believes in description, because it believes that the world already exists before we are able to talk about it. According to this, historians and artists can describe what is already there, and the work and the text become a strange sort of engraving. In this picture, human memory is a recording machine, and art as well finds a new form of representation: the recalling and the telling

of what has happened and is still happening. This is a description that also implies the vision of the writer, the curator, and the theorist as able to answer in real time to what is happening, which assumes that a certain quickness is needed or else it may be “too late.” Urgency resides, then, both inside and outside the text. But what if the world is not a noun to be talked about, but an adjective, for example? Or if the task of language is in relationship to the real, and is not to state that there is anything to say? Or if the role of theory is to introduce slowness, to mediate very slowly, to experience not the distance from the world, but its innerness, its inner immensity? What kind of discourse would we then have? What kind of politics could be addressed from an unhurried and slow utterance? If there is nothing to say, no message, no moral prescription to be taken from the message, no commitment, no worldview, no sort of truth that needs to be communicated, no ulterior significance, if we do not want to remain silent or to appear as if we want to avoid rigor, this means we need to reinvent the whole task of language in relation to objects and images.

With this in mind, language has a very strong relationship with memory, and memory is what actually needs to be liberated—liberated from its conception as a tool, a mechanical device that allows us to record, remember, and correct. We can instead envision higher tasks for memory, seeing it as a faculty directly connected to imagination and therefore being on the same terms as invention—in other words, inventing and recalling as being part of the same process. And this, of course, implies that the whole theoretical language, not just the similes and the metaphors but also the logic of the thinking and of the text itself, must be reformed. What I am saying is that we can look at the world, but that does not necessarily imply that the world looks back at us, which precludes any symbolism or transcendence.

Perhaps there needs to be a form of language that could also be less anthropocentric, less neurotic about the “*Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι* / *Erga kai Hēmerai* / *Works and Days*,” to quote the famous poem of Hesiod about the works of man and the logic that these works and ideas follow. And with this the point is not having anything to say. What remains is the way or manner of speaking, which presents another source of problems, since to be alone with language is one of the most complex things. Insofar as the understanding of history means delineating a chronological axis on which events are ordered, the sole task of the historian is ceaselessly to insert the stories that have not yet been included in that great continuous narrative. Meanwhile, the institution, the museum, where an “exhibition” is understood as a way of institutionalizing a material, is reduced to the place where the legitimacy of a right acquires a public form. The fact that the exercise of revision and the recovery of things forgotten by institutions provokes respect proves that a fitting vocabulary has been found—one that serves to avoid the unpredictable function of experience in art.

The importance of recovery and reconstruction of art-historical narratives as an institutional tactic in art is directly proportional to the impossibility of formulating a complex statement about the relationship between contemporary art and a discontinuous conception of time that is expressed in rhythms and cannot be represented as duration. In other words, it is a way of understanding time that is indifferent to the idea of progress and is therefore relieved of the imperative of innovation.

Meaning emerges from fiction.

Horacio Larrain Barros  
El Tofo. *Camanchaca* advances  
from the east (16/07/84)



#### IV.

The no-concept concept. The question of the correspondences between experience and words, perception and theory, inside the context of the exhibition is relevant today. Therefore, to state that an exhibition has no concept is to name the conditions that are at the limit of the logic of equivalence between experience and Logos, the “conservative” relation between practice and discourse, that assumes stability among the terms.

To claim that an exhibition has no concept is a much more complex proposition than saying that the works “speak for themselves.” Because even if works could speak for themselves, the disciplines ready to listen would need to rely on stable behavior between the senses and the notions producing the equivalence of the unknown into the known. A non-concept is not

the same as a lack of notions, ideas, or words to express the expectations of an exhibition. It is more of an event, an occasion to reformulate the sense of continuity between experience and language, to question the necessity of constructing a theory, an ideal discipline, that the works will then implement, or to see them as a cause that forces us to produce an equivalent language, able to describe what seems to be happening in the situation called an exhibition.

It is not a lack of concept that is announced here, but the consideration of initiating work in such a way that no concept will be in a relationship of exteriority with any other material, art or science, alive or inert, human or non-human. This is a provocative statement, not because it denies the importance of conceptualizing, of finding clear and distinct ideas, of listening to all that may appear silent, but because it questions the way in which art exhibitions contribute to defining the relationship between art and culture. In an exhibition of such a large scale, to turn the whole into an expression of an argument, or an idea, would run the risk of becoming lyrical, of ruining complexity by turning art into an explicit substance at the service of a too timely discourse.

Take the “no” here, attached to “concept,” as one takes the notion of carnival: it embodies the negative prefix, it says “no” locally and temporarily to order and an idea of hierarchy, of the serious. DOCUMENTA (13) shares this classical way of reversing sense, to gain it under a different form, and proclaims a certain carnivalesque method for it: topsy-turviness, eccentricity, mismatching, and some sort of profanation. Multiplicity is to be at work, but not as a subject; the project is not about polyphony. The other way, a dominant proliferation of styles, manners, logics, languages, is to be seen as potential materials to nourish the locus of a dialogic activity between art and its way of inquiring into the nature of knowledge.

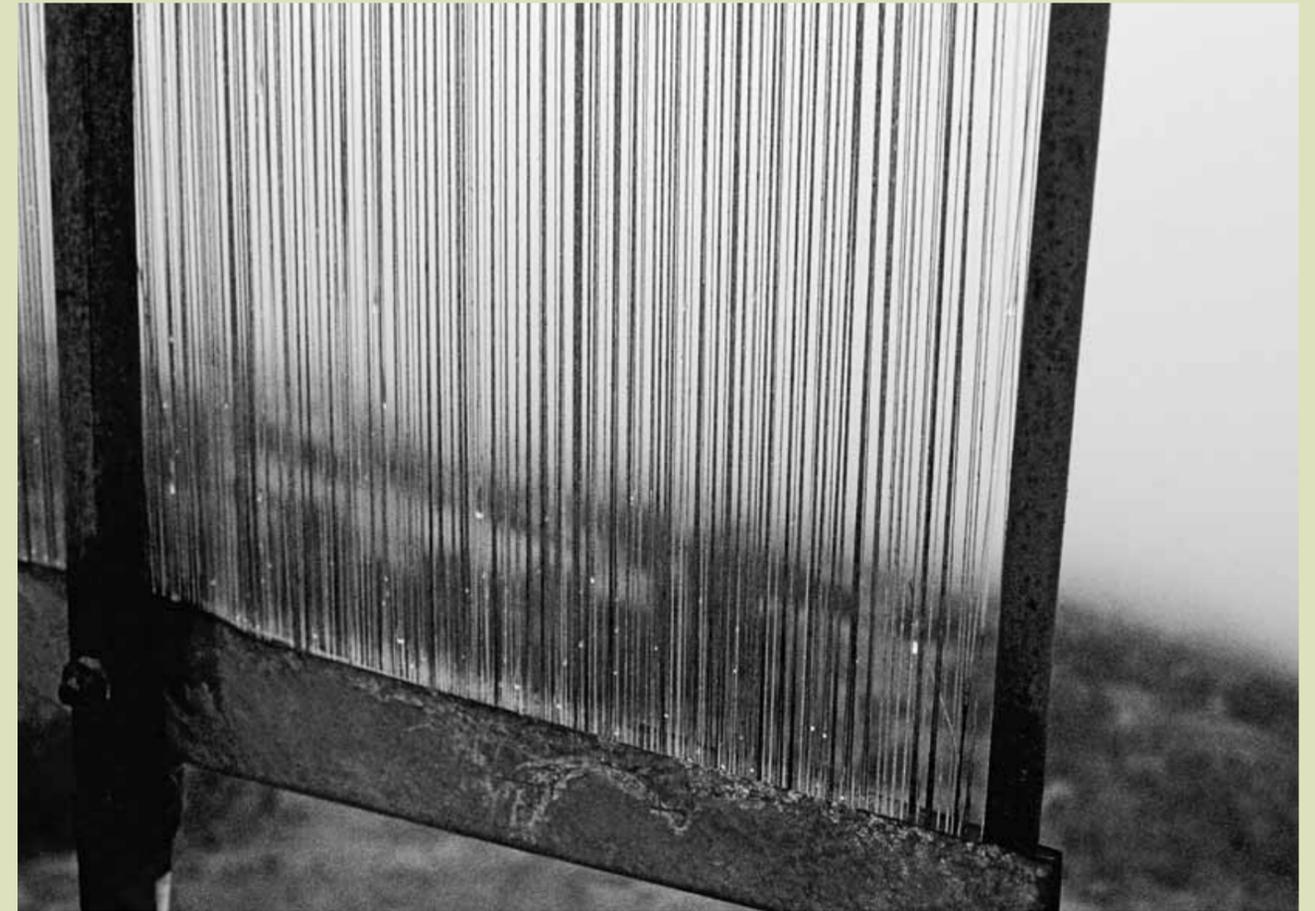
The new importance of philosophy and the social sciences in the sphere of contemporary art is related to an essential discovery: art today is located in a space uniquely productive for the interrelation of knowledges that would otherwise never intersect. This is similar to what Gaston Bachelard attempted to describe in the introduction to *The Poetics of Space*. Space appears where the logic of causality ceases and another principle takes hold: the principle of reverberation. Stating that space does not emerge on the basis of laws of causality means that the public sphere is not constructed by merely ensuring a series of conditions, just as the existence of a parliament or similar body does not guarantee that debate will take place. Something else must happen, and that is called reverberation. Practice proves that transparency is not enough, a system of logical argumentation does not necessarily unleash the will to change, let alone change itself.

Reverberation as an image expresses the movement between logics of thought and methods of work that have nothing in common. The possibility of different thinking depends on this very abstract mental operation. Contemporary art attempts to exist in this space of reverberation, rather than in the work-commentary equation. Art is not a pretext for thought, but rather a thought that operates by means of the constant exchange between different



*Trichocereus chiloensis* spp. *litoralis*. Km  
325 of the Panamerican North Road  
(14/10/82)

Right:  
El Tbo: Portezuelo, 670 m altitude.  
Fog's drop, or "camanchaca" (10/04/83)



systems that vacillate between the abstract and the concrete and that make us vacillate between them as well. According to Bachelard, the mental function that brings us closest to the enigmatic vastness of what is to come is daydreaming. For philosophy, it is a fundamental exercise. Daydreaming is a way of creating access to a sphere radically opposed to the domestic and different from the social. It brings an attitude so very exceptional that it takes the daydreamer outside this world, to another world that bears the mark of infinity. It points in the direction of a vital multiplication of mortal freedoms; it builds worlds and counter-worlds. Daydreaming is a constitutive space that suggests the ability to imagine consciousness itself.

Nothing productive emerges from translating ideas into images. The attempt to establish a correlation between ideas and their representation denies the unexpected and, hence, the hope for change. "Reverberation" names something quite different from—and more complex than—interdisciplinarity, or the borrowing of ideas and concepts among sciences. To be truly modern, theory cannot assume the role of the eternal mediator between the work and the viewer; it cannot limit itself to speaking after the fact.

The mission is not to renew our thinking about art, but to venture into other logics and place them at the core of artistic and cultural thinking. Maintaining that meaning emerges from fiction implies the realization that it is not philosophy that makes an emancipated viewer possible, but an artistic practice that has made an unprecedented effort to understand itself before the figure of the viewer. And that understanding implicates us all.

That is what artistic research consists of, and that is why an exhibition that wants to think through—rather than from—art, is now inconceivable. The production of space is an act of trust.