



This piece could just as well be called “Against Allegory.” Or even “Against Representation.” Or maybe even better yet “Against Language.” Never mind “Against Interpretation” (which is obviously a precedent). I would even almost be inclined to call it “Against Everything,” if that were not already taken and most deftly accounted for, not to mention true. But it is not.

THEORY OF THE MINOR

Allison Katz, *Giant Cock*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: FXP Photography

BY CHRIS SHARP



Allison Katz, *2 Cocks*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Giò Marconi, Milan. Photo: Filippo Armellini

This text is *for* as much as it is *against*. Essentially positive, it nevertheless defines itself negatively against certain tendencies, assumptions, and givens in contemporary art. It should be stated that this text, and the thoughts and position that actively inform it, have been largely sponsored by living and working in the context of Mexico City, and more generally Latin America, for the past four years. Consistently exposed there to a series of doxas regarding the production and dissemination of contemporary art, which are characterized by an implicit protocol to confuse art with journalism, pedagogy, and compulsory assertions of collectivity, all of which are thoroughly embedded in language, I have found myself forced to articulate an increasingly antagonistic position, which militates, perhaps anachronistically, for art itself. Or to be more precise a specific kind of art, which I will antagonistically call *minor*.

By minor, I of course do not mean in the classical sense of the term, as in lesser or secondary to the major (e.g., Guido Reni to Caravaggio), but rather as a mode of making that is characterized by resistance not as a political position, but as a natural consequence of the practice itself (it goes without saying that this consequence is always already political, insofar as it introduces conflict as opposed to consensus). In order to start to sketch out the minor, it is necessary to first take a stab at defining the major, which is more

of a verb than a noun. The major, like allegory, instrumentalizes. The major reduces and recuperates, streamlines, flattens out, absorbs, and eliminates difference. Art is never an end in itself, but a means, a vehicle. Seeking the lowest common denominator, which is often found in either spectacle, topicality, or use value, it continually asks what art can *do*, as opposed to what it *is* or *can be*, which it almost always takes for granted.

This is why most major contemporary art formally avails itself of the academicism of conceptualism, all but dismissing form or formal concerns as secondary or tertiary to the impetus of the work—which is to communicate or transmit a specific ideology *unambiguously*. The major is to art what pornography is to the (erotic) imagination (which it, unlike the minor, paralyzes). In other words, like the news, it takes much more than it gives (while the minor gives more than any one individual or era, for that matter, can take). The exhibition format par excellence of the major is the biennial. Servilely obeying the socially and politically expedient injunction to embody and communicate its moment as comprehensively as possible (for how else could it, as an exhibition format, be justified?), to be “contemporary,” the biennial generally structures itself around a few key concepts or “urgent political issues” which the art is meant to embody or illustrate, as if it were so much three-dimensional visual aid (of the news or concepts related thereto).

This is not to say that all art in biennials is major, or that all biennials are always themselves major. Salient exceptions exist—Massimiliano Gioni’s 2013 Venice Biennale represented a dubious attempt to deal with the minor on major terms, while Jay Sanders and Elisabeth Sussman’s 2012 Whitney Biennial was refreshingly minor—but unfortunately they are few and far between. One of the final and most crucial characteristics of the major is that it always seeks to *speak for* (the disenfranchised and oppressed, art being apparently the most effective way and place to do such a thing) as if it were a duty, a civic responsibility to essentially ventriloquize. It aims for the multitude. Abiding by the twenty-first-century logic of the zombie, it always thinks mathematically, in terms of numbers and statistics (like the museum, in fact, or better yet a biennial), which is how it measures “success.”

The major’s greatest antagonist is idiosyncrasy, which is a fundamental component, nay the very bedrock, of minor art.



Above, top - Nina Canell, *Treetops, Hillsides and Ditches* (detail), 2011. Courtesy: the artist; Daniel Marzona, Berlin; Mother’s Tankstation, Dublin; Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin. Photo: Robin Watkins

Above, bottom - Nina Canell, *Treetops, Hillsides and Ditches*, 2011, *The Promise of Moving Things* installation view at le Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine, 2014. Courtesy: the artist; Daniel Marzona, Berlin; Mother’s Tankstation, Dublin; Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin. Photo: André Morin / le Crédac



ektor garcia, *kriziz* installation views at kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City. Photo: Abigail Enzaldo

In case anyone has forgotten the meaning of this word, its etymology might help. Circa 1600, from French *idiosyncrasie*, from a Latinized form of the Greek *idiosynkrasia*, “a peculiar temperament,” from *idios*, “one’s own” + *synkrasis*, “temperament, mixture of personal characteristics,” from *syn*, “together” + *krasis*, “mixture,” from PIE root **kere-* “to mix, confuse; cook.” Therefore, a mixture of that which is absolutely one’s own, peculiar to an individual, unique, perhaps even nontransferable. I think the *krasis*, to mix, is also interesting insofar as it suggests the appropriation, mutation, and integration of preexisting elements into something that is unmistakably one’s own. **Irreducible and irrecoverable, it is intrinsically resistant to being co-opted or put into the service of allegory, nor can it be made to speak for, be deployed, or even assigned a function (the major positively loves to assign functions, socially, politically, and art historically).**

If anything, it interrupts and disrupts the process of assimilation to which the major continually and inexorably seeks to exercise on the world around it, like science. Incidentally, if my language here is evocative of Georges Bataille, it is because my thinking is directly informed by him, notably via Denis Hollier’s *Against Architecture*, and in particular Bataille’s notion, if it can be called that, of the heterological, which is much more of a precedent of the minor for me than Gilles Deleuze’s definition of it. Indeed, in sharp contrast to Deleuze, I would say that the three characteristics of minor art are: not the deterritorialization of language, but the development of one’s own personal, highly idiosyncratic language; not so much the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, but the acknowledgement that form, which is art’s primary duty, is always already political; and definitely not the collective assemblage of enunciation, but the impossibility of art to speak for anyone else if it does not first and foremost speak for itself. This is one of the reasons why the minor generally does not harmonize with

ideologies of collectivity, or science for that matter (“knowledge production”). For in the spirit of scientific method, the collective generally cannot brook manifestations of idiosyncrasy due to the simple fact that they cannot account for anything but themselves, and therefore must be suppressed in favor of the logical accountability of collective decision making (one of the fundamental features of the heterological is, it just so happens, unaccountability).

The minor is of course queer, but not due to its non-existent capacity to represent (the minor does not represent; it actually precludes representation, which is the domain of the major), but due to its non-classifiability, not to mention its inherent eschewal of the logic of the project, or better yet projects, which have identifiable beginnings and endings, or limits, as it were. I am thinking in particular of the markedly queer sculptural practice of the Mexican American artist ektor garcia, whose sprawling hybrid sculptures-cum-installations are continuous parts of an organic, ever-evolving, and unbounded whole. Devoid of partition, whatever he makes is a manifestation not of projects, but *the* project. Perhaps more importantly than this is how he and others like him elaborate their own personal formal language, and the extent to which it is indivisible from the materials and techniques they use. Drawing upon the iconography and material composition of everything from Mesoamerican religious imagery to southern Mexican ceramic-making techniques to gay leather subculture as well as, say, the likes of Paul Thek and Bruce Conner (both of whom could be considered minor artists), garcia absorbs it into the *krasis* (see above) of his crucible from which he fashions what is unmistakably his own way of making and non-linguistically signifying.

The Colombian artist José Antonio Suárez Londoño and the Mexican artist Rodrigo Hernández have markedly similar ways of proceeding. Personal to a magnificently gnomonic fault, Suárez Londoño’s minutely labored, small-scale drawings and etchings are the result of a highly developed idiosyncratic formal language (in which written language itself never has more than an idiosyncratic, non-narrative, and non-conceptual function), which is inspired by indigenous, pre-Colombian iconography as much as it is by European modernism. Hernández, whose ongoing highly plastic



Olga Balema, *Cannibals* installation views at Croy Nielsen, Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Photo: Joachim Schulz

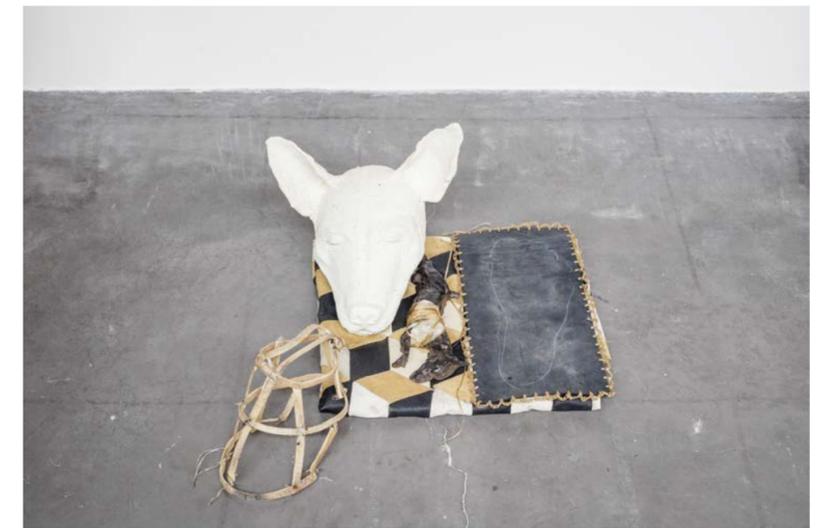


Olga Balema, *Threat to Civilization 3* (detail), 2015, *Cannibals* installation view at Croy Nielsen, Berlin, 2015. Courtesy: Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Photo: Joachim Schulz

practice interrogates the divisions between drawing, sculpture, and painting, likewise draws on a heterogeneous variety of sources to construct his own formal idiom. It is perhaps not a coincidence that all of these artists, and those that follow, incidentally, are makers who work primarily with their hands—for what method of producing more directly registers and transmits the idiosyncratic?

Unlike the major, which ratifies, reaffirms, and relies upon specific, already thoroughly codified linear, if dialectical, art historical traditions (for instance Wade Guyton is the quintessential major painter, and it is perhaps no mere coincidence that his latest body of work was actually the news), the minor creates or unearths new or unexpected, if tangential, trajectories. To this end, examples of contemporary minor painting range in age and geography from the Canadian, London-based Allison Katz, to the Belgian *éminence grise* Walter Swennen, to the Texan Daniel Rios Rodriguez, whose practices variously engage and depend upon minor practitioners from Francis Picabia to René Daniëls to Forrest Bess (all of whom have recently been subject to revivals—meaning we could very well be in the age of the minor). Abandoning a linear approach toward the horizon of painting, they could be said to move along it in lateral shifts and jumps, while developing radically idiosyncratic pictorial methods and idioms.

Meanwhile the issue of allegory is a tricky one, because many minor artists and even writers would *seem* to traffic in allegory, but upon close inspection, it becomes clear that they do not (if you disagree, ask yourself why we still read Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, while we barely read Jean-Paul Sartre or, say, Alberto Moravia, the latter of whom were egregious allegorists; a similar dichotomy could be established between the likes of Philip Guston and Bernard Buffet). The work of the Detroit native Michael E. Smith could be and has been read as an allegory of Detroit, and, by extension America, but that is obviously a simplistic interpretation of a practice whose formal, spatial, and affective complexity has few parallels in contemporary art. When it comes down to it, what he



ektor garcia, *kriziz* installation view at kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City. Photo: Abigail Enzaldo

does is just too strange and, yes, idiosyncratic to logically signify (which is the business of the major—logically, nay serviceably signifying). It always already exceeds whatever function might be assigned to it, and is as such excessively dysfunctional. The sculpture of Olga Balema, by virtue of its relationship to the body, undergoes a similar procedure, a kind of feint, if you will, but always errs on the side of excess, and as such ungrudgingly refuses to submit to manageable systems of signification, such as allegory.

By the same token, a similarly quasi if pseudo allegorical attitude can be found in the work of the likes of the Swedish artist Nina Canell or the German photographer Jochen Lempert. However, in their cases this elusive dalliance with allegory touches on the



From top left, clockwise - Daniel Rios Rodriguez, *South St. Marys*, 2015-2016; *Pecs*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York; Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; *Untitled*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Michael Benevento, Los Angeles. Photo: the artist; *Untitled*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and KOW, Berlin. Photo: Ladislav Zajac; Daniel Rios Rodriguez, *Morning Breath*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York



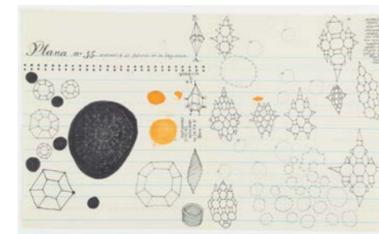
From top left, clockwise - Rodrigo Hernández, *Kippfigur (Figure De Basculement)*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and P420, Bologna. Photo: Tim Bowditch; *I Am Nothing (Dinosaur)*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Galeria Madragoa, Lisbon. Photo: Marc Doradzillo; Jean-Luc Moulène, *Membres à queue (Paris, 2014)*, 2014. © Jean-Luc Moulène by SIAE, Rome, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn; *Ca Propre (Anse) [That Clean (Handle)]*, (Paris, 2016), 2016. © Jean-Luc Moulène by SIAE, Rome, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; *Fairy Fantasy*, 2016. © Jean-Luc Moulène by SIAE, Rome, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Rodrigo Hernández, *Head (Pedro)*, *Pedro* installation detail at o.T. Raum für aktuelle Kunst, Lucerne, 2012. Courtesy: the artist



Jochen Lempert, *Untitled (Flora)*, 2016. © Jochen Lempert by SIAE, Rome, 2017. Courtesy: BQ, Berlin and ProjecteSD, Barcelona. Photo: Roman März, Berlin

domain of science, whose sincere and profound engagement is always ultimately exceeded by the minor quiddity of the work. Whereas Canell deploys and harnesses imperceptible currents, conductors, and energies to singularly sculptural (non-illustrational), effect, Lempert's black-and-white photographs of flora and fauna always go beyond the formal zoological and taxonomical origins of his photography, not to mention his training as a biologist. Any attempt to oblige their respective practices to signify in any systematic, scientific way is always already foiled not only by a healthy quotient of affect, but more importantly by a complete and total commitment to the plastic and formal (non-linguistic) qualities of their work.

In an age of increasingly hypertrophic expansion (galleries and museums as well as the grand gestures that must fill them), the minor can also refer to a diminishment of scale and valorization of intimacy as a mode of engagement (the American sculptor Vincent Fecteau, for example, is a master of the minor). But this of course is not always the case. Notable exceptions to the question of scale include the German sculptor Manfred Pernice and the French artist Jean-Luc Moulène. Whatever scale they are working at, the material and formal properties of their inimitable practices always exceed and collapse any linguistic framework within which their



José Antonio Suárez Londoño, *Planas: del 1 de enero al 31 de diciembre del año 2005*, 2005. Courtesy: Casas Riegner, Bogotá. Photo: Miguel Suárez Londoño

work might be placed—never mind the radical heterogeneity at the heart of what they both do.

When all is said and done, however, any attempt to describe and codify the minor is potentially, and even ideally, an exercise in theoretical vanity. It almost doesn't need to be said that the minor, in keeping with its essential irreducibility, can be neither a formula nor a strategy. But if anything unites, binds together, and courses through the work of every artist I have just mentioned, it is the creation of their own thoroughly plastic languages, which naturally, non-serviceably refuse to submit to (written or spoken) language. To this end, at least where the viewer is concerned, the minor assumes an almost narrative property, not in the sense of recounting a story (or an allegory), but rather in the sense of positing and generating (new) possibility. For what gives, vitalizes, and renews in the spirit of discovery more than the sense of pure possibility (of being, experiencing, apprehending, and understanding)? Indeed, the irruption of each truly minor artist necessarily entails the introduction of a corresponding quotient of possibility into the world.

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José Antonio Suárez Londoño, *Planas: del 1 de enero al 31 de diciembre del año 2005*, 2005. Courtesy: Casas Riegner, Bogotá. Photo: Miguel Suárez Londoño



José Antonio Suárez Londoño, *Dibujo*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana. Photo: Miguel Londoño



José Antonio Suárez Londoño, *Cuadernos de año - Paul Klee*, 1988. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNOstudio