

Origins and primary forms

I lingered, naturally, on the sentence: I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths. Almost instantly, I understood: 'the garden of forking paths' was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'the various futures (not to all)' suggested to me the forking in time, not in space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen, he chooses simultaneously-all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

Space and time

It would be unfortunate to speak of visual arts in the Caribbean solely starting off from the work of an artist, moreover, when his production is diasporic by nature and it is implied in a complex discourse that simultaneously integrates and extends the codifications that are enforced by the national or territorial connections. This body of work, which could serve as a starting point, reflects so much of the concerns and the contradictions as well as the varied and complex cultural references of a universe of voyages and crossroads. It is so that the artistic production of Fernando Varela, although framed and contextually determined by means of the geography of an island, goes farther and reveals those encounters between the cultural production and the communities where they are inserted and from where they come. The determination, as a consequence, is more than geographic, it is rather an emotional determinism established by the way of seeing things and attitude towards the life of Varela.

The ephemeral has become, for many years now, one of the quintessential qualities of contemporary art. The fugacity, as it relates to the limited permanence of the artistic object as

well as the immediacy of its contents that deal mainly with the pending and the imperious issues.

This circumstance, far from being a contradictory condition or a reflection that simplifies certain routes of production of meaning, is none other than an observation that will allow the analysis of the recent work of Fernando Varela.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, the artistic production is put under the considerations of the transitory and uncertainty that characterizes today's society. In *Liquid Art?* Bauman criticizes certain lines of contemporary art in the sense that they have an incorrect appreciation of temporality, and I quote him when he states that some contemporary artists only concentrate in "(...) the fleeting events: events that, at the very beginning, one knows that will be ephemeral". The work of Varela is located, by opposition, in a differing parcel. In a play of research and juxtaposed observations, Varela bets to the analysis of permanence, to the exploration of the evolutionary and the philosophical origins from within the discourse of the visual arts. Therefore, Varela's work occupies a fundamental space within the panorama of the contemporary production of meaning in the Caribbean and the Dominican Republic when attempting to look for routes of analysis and answers to questions of general and universal order from within the artistic processes.

The "diverse futures and times which themselves also proliferate and fork" that Ts'ui Pen lucidly chose to construct in model and words the garden of forking paths serves as a sort of canon to decipher the most recent ways traveled by the work of Fernando Varela. His artistic production is defined by a vastness of symbolic and spiritual references, which could refer to the contemplative, but simultaneously it is a lucid challenge to the indifferent and linear thought of the contemporaneity as it contradicts it continuously. Each of his works asks a perennial questioning of the spiritual, social and ideological and therefore, since the container of these reflections is art: aesthetic.

Diverse futures

For some, to speak of the spiritual nowadays could be seen as inconvenient, or at least, a product of mass production that pretends, from a perceptive parcel of popular sensibility, to guide “destinies” and to homogenize thought. Nevertheless, beyond proclaiming the redeeming qualities of the artistic production, I prefer to focus for this specific case in the spiritual as an instrument, as a tool of “binding” towards understanding, or at least the observation of our contemporary reality from the artistic production.

Let’s analyze this in segments: to enunciate the spiritual from within the contemporary artistic practice it is necessary to contextualize the fact and its effect in the present discourse as one of the most important and challenging routes of statement and critical reflection. It is important, because it can be established as an alternative resource to the proclamation, the mimesis and the denunciation. The work of Fernando Varela embodies this attitude of the artistic production in a revealing way. It reveals not only the urgency in contemporary art of a different subjectivity, focused in subjects that could be considered intangible and individual. It has to do more, in my opinion, with the paradox of the abundance of information, the “effortless accessibility” to evidences and the obvious distrust caused by it; the suspicion that produces what is only visible.

The spiritual component in the Varela’s work derives from study -the industrious investigation. For that reason the elements transferred to his work are of a categorical depth, but simultaneously -and here is one of the great paradoxes of his body of work- they encompass a visual forcefulness that makes visible, with an amazing clarity, issues as complex as the origin and the primary elements. Let’s use as an example his first Origin of 1999, a paradigmatic work from the series with the same title: the artist decides that “he needed to retake that path and extend those explorations to its deepest consequences”. This return to his previous explorations provokes this body of work to come as the result of a spiritual investigation and research that borders on the anthropological examination. This can be understood as anthropological because it leads towards fields of study that refer to the human being in an integral form. This body of work produces meanings from diverse discourses and tries to

include so much of the spiritual and the biological evolution of our species, as well as the development and the ways of life, the cosmogonies and the sources of knowledge.

Can this meander of meanings be then a constant search, a “circular” search I would say, of answers and definitions? In the work of Fernando Varela it is. Temporalities, visualizations and questions come together and, as his investigations and searches deepen, define their form and “artistic appearance”.

Diverse temporalities

Another characteristic that excels in the works of Varela is the use of time as a category and the way of sequentially structuring his body of work. I’m referring to the use of time, assumed as an omnipresent element that is strained in the interstices of all other parallel discourses. He uses time in different ways: referring to an original phase, to what he considers original to evidence an intertextuality that indicates a coexistence of chronologies, which at the same time is simultaneity of discourses.

“Time forks perpetually towards innumerable futures”, says Stephen Albert to Yu Tsun in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and even though it refers to a particular event in the story, such an emphatic declaration can be used as another element for the analysis of Varela’s work. It is interesting and even symptomatic that the first *Origins* were generated many years ago from the notion of duality, and that the artist, in the circularity of his practice retakes it once again to explore it more deeply.

Origins and *Primary forms* are two independent series that are linked to each other. One can be considered the consequence of the other -its continuity. But we can perceive their absolute complementariness and parallelism. The indissoluble bonds between these two series go from the conceptual statements to its own technical resources that provide visual cohesion to the body of work.

In *Origins*, a series that started ten years ago and that the artist reactivates and gives new meaning at present, there is an amount of layers of analysis and critical points that we will refer to. At first sight, these set of works are perceived as an almost taxonomical sequence of studies. Each one of the pieces is a distinctive and profound classification of a specific object or event. The first indication on the taxonomy of the universe that Varela proposes is a canvas that fragments and shows the cosmos and its detailed parts. For the artist, this fragmentation and detailed work is “a formal search that is transformed more and more into intimate and symbolic investigations”. But as well as the classification analyses go from general to the specific, in the same way, the artist, came together with a form that summarizes everything, and states: “the integration of the oval form as a symbol of the original: a form represents a state: an imminence state, everything is contained in this form, is the generating form from which the universe arises, the form is the One, the origin, the nothing and the whole.”

And once more, in the circularity that defines this artist’s production, we returned to time. The works that are part of this series follow rhythmically the succession of a line of time. But not the time of the wristwatch that hangs heavy of our arms, but a totally different one. Each outline and superposition of gestures or pigment layers engages in demonstrating another time imperceptible one for those who do not track it. “The origins tells us about the progress in a cosmic time, make a graphic outline of the origin of the form, of the space and of the time”, correctly states Varela.

“Through a process of inner conflict, The Divine Will manifests itself as pairs of opposites, such as will and desire, light and darkness, spirit and matter” states one of the philosophers that have a major influence on Varela’s work, Jakob Böhme. This process of contrast and revelation manifest in these words is visibly created in the pieces that are part of *Primary forms*.

The continuity and sequence of the oval form in repetition can refer, by association, to the counts of a necklace, to the chain of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) as a constant element that is comprised in every cell and that contains the necessary information for the development and

the operation of all the organisms. For that reason, from the canon proposed with the Origins series the artist considers a parallel and logical continuation to this rhizomatic discourse where the idea of light as a revealing instrument of realities and truths has a great pre-eminence.

In these works, the development of the oval and dual forms generated a new graphic outline that the artist calls primary forms... "The first forms that originate in the cosmic experience in time and space. From them will arise all the infinite forms of the spiritual and physical embodiment", Varela points out. I use the idea of rhizome. It is for this analysis as a descriptive or epistemological model - as it was developed by Gilles Deleuze- as an "image of thought", based on the botanical rhizome that apprehends multiplicities. For that reason, this sequence is visible in the pictorial with the use of the monochrome and the chiaroscuro... again, light as a tool. Occasionally, a point of darkness is evident in the canvas or paper, an element that works as a strongpoint, and at the same time, as a site of inflection for the development of the other forms that constitute the artwork.

Times that fork

Fernando Varela's series Origins and Primary forms evolve parallel and branch off like Ts'ui Pen's garden. Its mark is the constant movement, certain evolutionary dynamics that it is distinguished as an almost genetic sign. These series approach life, but not the quotidian in its more aberrant simplicity, but the life that takes place from within resistance, continuity and light. As Balzac stated: "Movement by reason of resistance, produces a combination that is life".

Sara Hermann

Historian and Art Critic