Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan

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Kein Banner in der Sonne and other ambiguities

by Susanne Gaensheimer

In early summer 2003, a pilgrimage through the sheer endless expanse of central London took me finally to The Showroom in the East End, where I had come to see the newly-opened exhibition of two artists I have known for a long time. As usual, when confronted with works by Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan, I soon had the uneasy feeling that I did not quite understand what the exhibition was really about. Immediately upon entering the exhibition space, I found myself on an extensive floor painting, colourfully executed and apparently stencilled onto the grey, concrete floor. From my perspective, at first I was unable to take in the whole of it. It was not so much the restricted view that gave me the familiar feeling of missing something; it was, rather, the idiosyncratic combination of elusive and by no means

clearly readable, post-minimalist elements in the painting. The monochromatic surface was painted in a light and warm tone somewhere between apricot and beige, with a bright red circle superimposed over the corner of the upper right quarter of this surface. A deep black, conically tapering bar cut across both the monochrome area and the circle, with one end forming a trapezoid shape against the red segment. Of course, the choice of colour and the superimposition of unrelated geometric shapes in the painting immediately brought the Suprematist compositions of Kasimir Malevich, the shaped canvases of Ellsworth Kelly and the geometric patterns of Modernist interior designs to mind. These were obvious associations, as I knew that the Constructivist avant-garde of the twentieth century was a major reference point for Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan in their investigations of space and architecture. But I also knew that there was something to this work beyond formal allusions: some meaning directly related to the artists' lives and thoughts.

Looking for information, I read the title of the work discreetly inscribed on the wall: *Kein Banner in der Sonne*. That was a surprise: a German title for a work by South American artists in an art gallery in the UK? If not English, then Spanish would have seemed the more obvious option. Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan later told me that they had chosen the German title because at the time of the exhibition they were living in Berlin, where they had just taken up a scholarship awarded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). *Kein Banner in der Sonne* – No Flag in the Sun. So, the black bar, that looked as though it had been cut out from rather than painted onto the surface, and recalling the cut-outs of Gordon Matta-Clark, was an abstract representation of a flag, whereas the warm red segment stood for the sun. But which flag, which country, and which sun?

The tapering, conical shape suggested that the flag was moving towards the sun and it reminded me of Icarus. Together with his father, Daedalus, he had been held captive on the island of Crete by its king, Minos (some sources say in the very labyrinth Daedalus had built for the King). They escaped on wings made of wax and feathers but the euphoria of flying made Icarus reckless. Despite his father's warning, he soared higher and higher until the sun melted the wax holding the feathers together and Icarus plummeted into the sea. Did the artists mean the negation in the title of this work as a metaphor for the destructive force of the sun? Or, conversely, for the incompatibility of the flag, a symbol for territorial claims and domination, with the sun, which stands for light and life? The painting yielded no answers to these questions – arising from a purely personal chain of associations – and I was left with the semantic ambiguity of this work of art.

Crossing the big exhibition space at the entrance of The Showroom, I reached a second, smaller room, on whose left wall a series of five coloured-paper collages had been hung. The shapes on the collages had the same kind of abstractness as the flag and the sun on the floor painting, an abstractness that eliminated all depth and texture in the objects and spaces. The first collage was called *News Coverage* and showed a multitude of coloured trapezoids converging to suggest some sort of a spatial perspective. However, their pronounced two-dimensionality and decorative colours – rich oranges, yellows and browns – gave the collage the character of a 1970s design, and the longer I looked at it, the more I lost sight of the initial spatial impression. The press information for the exhibition explained that the collage was based on screen layouts used by news channels such as the BBC or CNN to simultaneously communicate a multitude of verbal and visual information through dynamic patterns and hierarchies of layered surfaces. In this context, the emphasis on surface in the stencilled shapes of the collage could also be read as a comment on the shallow and repetitive nature of information offered in the media.

The collage *House of the Eagle* seemed equally inaccessible. Grey-brown on orange paper, it depicted a strongly simplified building in the shape of an eagle, built as a millionaire's private villa in Uruguay in the 1940s. The head of the eagle is said to have housed the owner's library. A listed building currently under renovation, this megalomaniac architectural project, the artists say, represents the subtle shift towards a growing conservatism in many South American nations. Obviously, the collage will not yield this information to viewers unaware of the political background, and according to the artists, it is not essential to understanding the work. What is significant, however, is that despite the eagle's strangely reduced shape and strong formal alienation, this historically and politically loaded motif still conveys meaning. Whether we know the specific history of the building or not, we recognise it as 'power architecture'. These tensions between the collective readability of signs, on the one hand, and their opaqueness, on the other, seemed to characterise all works in the exhibition.

By using abstraction to reduce the world to pure surface – as in *Kein Banner in der Sonne*, *News Coverage* or *House of the Eagle* – Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan detach the sign from the real object, making it indecipherable. The resulting blank seemed to interrupt the communication lines between myself and the work, creating a kind of semantic gap similar to the one occurring when texts are translated or information is simplified in the media. It was this gap that always made the confrontation with works by Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan so perplexing, and that, as I now realise, is an inherent quality of their works: a golden thread running through their entire oeuvre. It seems to be precisely this disturbing feeling of mutual non-

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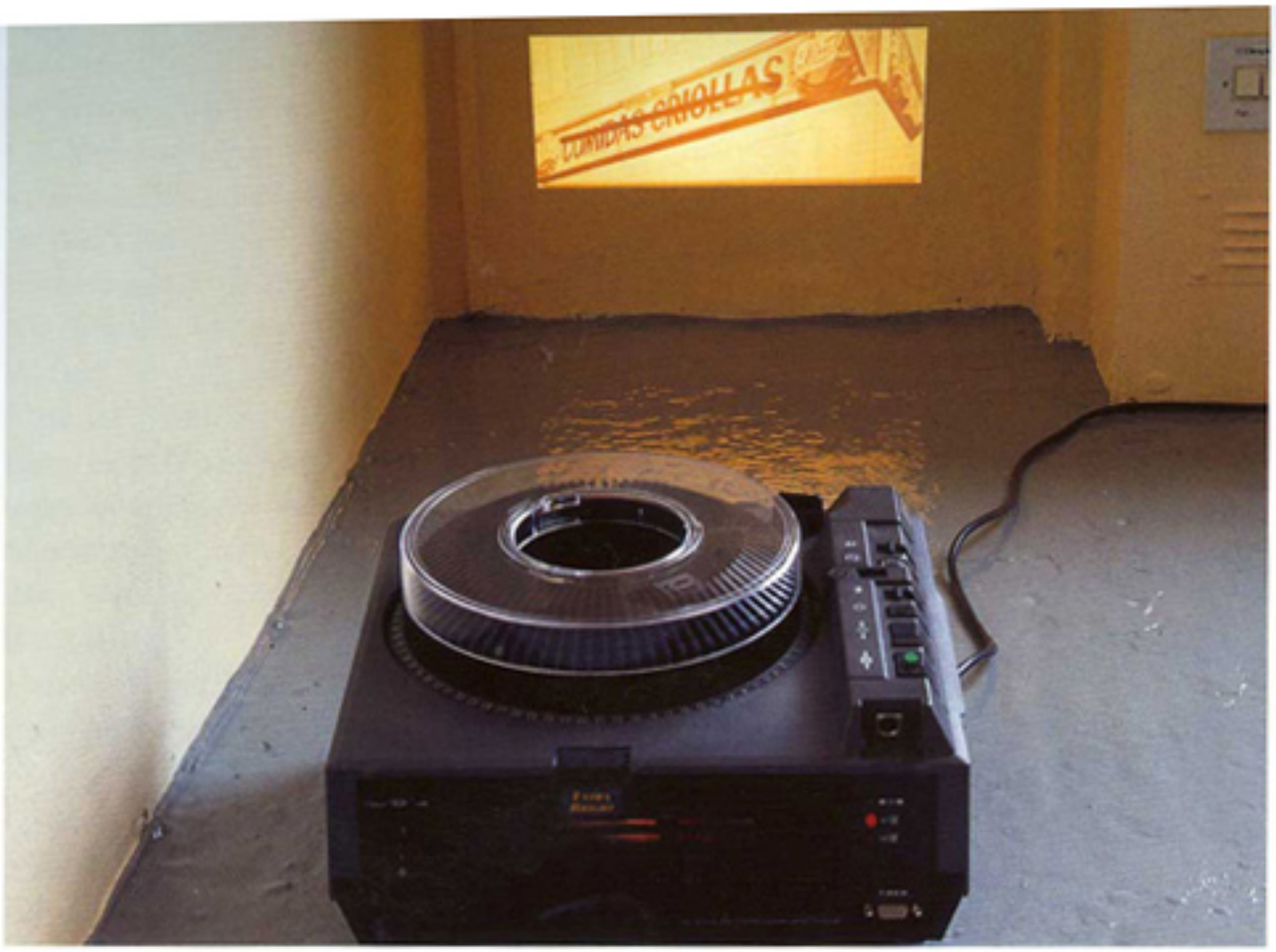
understanding that the artists are essentially interested in: a non-understanding resulting from the tension between an idealised homogeneity and the actual heterogeneity characterising communication in the multinational societies of our globalised world. Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan moved from Argentina to New York in 1995 and since that time have been living in the United States, Sweden and Germany. Their everyday experience is profoundly affected by this tension, and their work illustrates that communication is not so much a matter of understanding than of non-understanding, a place of conflict rather than harmony.

With the biographies of Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan in mind, characterised as they are by the political and cultural circumstances of their past in Argentina, a period of transit in the United States, and the German present, I now saw even the formal choices these artists make as a form of cultural and political criticism. The pervasive element of abstraction in their work now seemed to go beyond a linguistic detachment of the signifier from its signified. At a figurative level, I would tend to read this as a detachment of the senses through the kind of communication that the artists experience in the semantic heterogeneity of our time. The cut-outs in *Kein Banner in der Sonne* and the collages turned out to be more than a purely formal device and suggested a hidden political statement: that which is cut out is extracted from the overall context and, due to the laws of entropy, cannot be replaced, much as the identity of a colonised culture that, once erased, cannot be reconstructed. The political and social references made by Juan Maidagan & Dolores Zinny, however, are just as ambiguous as their use of signs. They work at a meta-level where the real context is often blurred by the ostensibly decorative and tactile qualities of their works.

These works of Juan Maidagan & Dolores Zinny, which speak to the emotions and convey meaning at an undefined, even unconscious level, were especially effective in the third part of the exhibition. In the gallery's back room the artists had installed a curtain that further instrumentalised the sensuality already implied in the soft paper of the collages. Thick, soft, off-white canvas fell from ceiling to floor and it was not clear whether the curtain merely concealed the wall or whole parts of the room. An added irritant was a number of long, vertical pockets of colour sewn into the curtain and at first glance appearing to be folds in the drapery. These streaks of black, dark red and earthy yellow (taking up the colours of the collages) made a clear contrast to the lighter material of the curtain and seemed to suggest something like the spaces behind a façade, spaces for hiding things or for hiding in. The question that was concealed behind the curtain remained unanswered. I was not sure whether I was allowed to touch and lift the heavy material; respect for the art kept me from trying, and so I was left in the state of expectant curiosity I knew from childhood: what was behind it?



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The curtain seemed to reflect the enigmatic character of the other works, although this was not a logical enigma but an emotional one. It reminded me of the mysterious short stories by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, in whose labyrinthine tales, fiction (along forking paths) insinuates itself into reality. The curtain had a similar effect on me as these tales, and that parallel was just as obvious as my associations with the other allusions and references in the works of Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan had been, knowing that Borges is one of their great heroes. They called the installation *For Unbearable Things*, and it was clear that the dark folds behind the curtain's light surface pointed to the unconscious and what is suppressed in the human psyche: the nocturnal realms of our being that, while motivating our actions, rarely or never see the light of day. Thinking about the unconscious and how it is related to aesthetics and perception, I recalled Gilles Deleuze's rather complicated text about the fold as an image of Baroque metaphysics in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, or rather, what I could remember of it. 'The world is a hallucination', Deleuze says, and what we perceive does not exist outside our bodies (Deleuze speaks of the body as a monad), but is locked into infinitesimal perceptions sedimented at the dark bottom of each individual monad. These 'microperceptions' or 'representatives of the world' (without which, Deleuze says, perception would be impossible), can be imagined as tiny clusters of folds in all directions. The folds hold the entire unconscious knowledge on which our conscious 'macroperceptions' are built. Perception, therefore relies on a totality of small elements of perceptions that are folded away in the layers of the soul. And, even as we are in the act of perceiving, these elements disturb the balance of the previous perception and prepare for the one that follows. How else, Deleuze asks, could pain follow pleasure, if it were not for thousands of tiny pains or, rather, half pains scattered into our pleasure, which then unite in what is conscious pain?

Going back to the first room in the gallery and towards the exit, I discovered a further work that I had overlooked when coming in. It was installed almost out of sight at the lower edge of a niche next to the windowsill. Hardly 40cm wide and 15cm tall, this projection showed a photograph of the sign belonging to the formerly Creole restaurant in which in 1971 Gordon Matta-Clark along with Carol Goodden and other artists realised the legendary *Food* project. The artist-run restaurant soon became a hub of the art scene in early 70s Soho, long before the established galleries, bars and boutiques began to colonise the district. *Food* was not just a restaurant and meeting place for artists, but also a platform for all kinds of exhibitions and other activities. The photograph shows the shop sign with the restaurant's original name, *'Comidas Criollas'*, crossed out. It is one of a series of photographs by Richard Landrey that document the stages in the transformation of the old into the new restaurant, as if

Installation view

recording the construction of a new identity. For Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan, this work, *Food, 1971*, is more than an homage to Gordon Matta-Clark and his *Food* project in general: it is a kind of analytical portrait of the artist. Born in 1943 to an American mother and a Chilean father (the painter Roberto Matta), he represented the first US-born generation of a Latin American family. In the photograph, the crossed-out word 'Criollas' gives symbolic expression to the existential principle of denial inherent in the hybrid identity of the Creole; a homeless and split identity that Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan may have experienced in their own biographies. *Food, 1971* therefore not only referred to one of the great artists of the 1970s, but also contained an autobiographical element. That this self-reference was installed in such an inconspicuous place (nearly invisible at the bottom edge of the room) made it appear like a footnote: something that is of prime importance, but has been extracted from the overall context.