

Planning Stages

JOSEFINA AYERZA ON GUILLERMO KUITCA

GUILLERMO KUITCA typically settles on a given structure as a form of emptiness. One may consider his work a kind of seating plan, as the Argentinean artist himself will tell you: Vacant chairs attest to an absence; what's more, the plan is only a representation, not the thing it represents. And so the represented thing becomes merely a gap, a void—space as an object. Such empty space accrues the element of time, and the hidden cause of the desire. Am I saying that Kuitca draws, paints, fixes his collages into the dynamics of desire? Yes.

Not that there is one and only one structure in Kuitca's work. Rather, there are series of ones, with each individual series depicting the form of a different plan: map, cemetery, stadium, prison, theater, or conveyor belt. The function of the structure is not to unify a series but rather to convey meaning to components of the series, to begin a *count* of what exists—namely, Kuitca's different plans, swarming.

For example, the artist's most recent show, "Guillermo Kuitca: Acoustic Mass," at Sperone Westwater in New York, took up the archetype of a theater with nine collages, each depicting an opera house. They included *Covent Garden VI*; *New Opera House, Oslo*; *Opéra de Paris, Palais Garnier*; *Acoustic Mass VI (The Old Vic)* (all works 2005). These collages are made with remarkably thin pieces of paper, some cut straight, others in curves with bends, turns, and twists. With these shards, Kuitca "shows" the sound of the roaring theater. (In a conversation at the gallery, he told me simply, "This is the theater structure, and this is the music.") But Kuitca's music is soundless, of course, a kind of name for something that is not. The set of all such sounds, some twenty years of Kuitca's theaters, is empty.

To explain: For Jacques Lacan, the sound of one hand clapping, as in a Zen koan, equals an empty set; Kuitca offers an exemplary instance of this empty set, or what analysis calls "a discourse without words." Suffice to begin the count, then. In mathematics, the notation for the sound of one hand clapping is \emptyset , which means that the set of the empty set is one. Kuitca's counting of any structural archetype begins with this. Now, in order to count to two, you take, for

example, the set comprising of "the theater's empty set and the set of the empty set"—in other words, comprising "zero and one." To continue the count in these terms, "three" is "the set of the empty set, the set of the empty set, and the set of the empty set." In the seemingly endless repetitions of his various plans, Kuitca provides viewers with this kind of movement and stasis; each image is an addition in numbers, yet also merely placed against the set rendered after the archetype.

But there remains the issue of how to separate mathematical activity from the product of mathematical activity. What distinguishes the two? There always is a part of mathematical activity that cannot be captured in symbols, a lack encountered after all the layers of description are peeled away—the unshareable. The whole is, in other words, more than the sum of the parts.

Put another way, the empty set is, in a sense—for Kuitca, for Lacan—the empty tomb. Consider the example of Hamlet: The appearance of the ghost, Hamlet's father, allows the prince to think the grave has been opened and emptied. In Kuitca's discourse without words, such an "empty tomb" becomes visible in repetition—the paintings organized in sequence, like signifiers, chained together. Thus, the unshareable, that which is a ghost, can be the signifier only as something *singular*. We could also say the ghost is the singular subject.

Another figure from literature is perhaps more helpful in locating this singularity in Kuitca: King Oedipus, who disappeared without a trace. His successors knew



Guillermo Kuitca, *Acoustic Mass I (Covent Garden)*, 2005, mixed media on paper, 71 x 71".

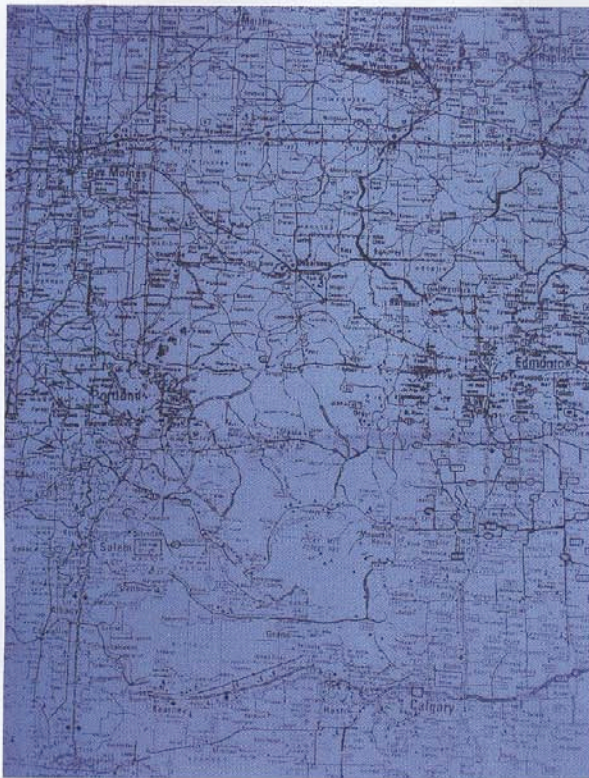
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where his grave was located, yet it was unmarked. Hence, a second way of signifying the empty set is to keep a secret, something passed down only from father to son.

"When I was fairly young," Kuitca explained, "my father would make a mark to signify the finishing point of my artwork." For years, in Kuitca's work there was in fact a clearly noticeable end to every artwork, and the corresponding ritual; until 1989, he signed his paintings with the letter *K*, something that appeared in arbitrary places, from work to work.

Today, then, the signifier that is a ghost—the secret that is kept by the descendants of Theseus—is the proper name. And, in fact, in Kuitca's work, proper names are often repeated. As early as 1982, he made four paintings all titled *Nadie olvida nada* (Nobody Forgets Anything); the Sperone Westwater show included five works

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Left: Guillermo Kuitca, *Everything* (detail), 2003, mixed media on canvas, 10' x 5' 5". Above: Guillermo Kuitca, *Untitled*, 1992, acrylic on mattress, twenty beds, each 15¼ x 23¼ x 47¼".

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either titled or subtitled *Covent Garden*. The ghost appears as the name passes among them; the individual works are, in a word, ghostly.

So the ghost that haunts Kuitca's paintings is the name that talks behind the colors—the voice of the name, and of the doubled name. For the former we stick to the literal, to the musical in the series; for the latter to the story: Between 1987 and 1989, Kuitca used the title *Strauberry Fields Forever* at least twice, and made two paintings called *Porgy and Bess*; in 2001 and 2002 he made no fewer than four collages titled *The Ring*. We go back to the zero that corresponds to the empty grave—what is visible in Kuitca's repetitions—and look in a different way. The set of Kuitca's empty set is the signifier as it accounts for the “here” and the “there,” the “this” and the “that”—in other words, the “theater” and the “music.”

In *Opéra de Paris, Palais Garnier*, among the works shown at Sperone Westwater, there is a simple insistent push that separates the figure from background but is contained; the color becomes so much color,

blue, you celebrate your arrival at the bottom of the surface, having been moving on a visual ladder of vibrations and gravity. (You enter the eye of the artist, or enter the convoluted sound in motion; you are all over the place and in no place. That is, you are in the score.) And in *Opéra de Paris, Palais Garnier*, it is as if Wagner were finally audible from within the colors of the name, as if it had spoken. The name that wants to talk behind the colors insists, color of voice, over color of voice.

Everything happens at the same time in these works. And *Everything* is the recurring title for Kuitca's maps, which divided the exhibition space of a second gallery at Sperone Westwater and provided another way to grasp the artist's logic of archetypes. Sight: vertical maps of intimate detail yet also of huge dimensions, representations of interstate highways rendered in orange. But these maps are liars, meant to misguide you: Dallas is not next to Philadelphia, as it appears in the white *Everything*, 2004, nor is it next to Kansas City. Kuitca introduces *Everything* here, but only to give us the name of another scene.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes an idea of mass in which “everything” is touching “everything” else, in which all things are connected in a formless

whole. He calls this principle, by which everything is touching everything else, the “flesh of the world.” And he goes on to say that the field of the visual is cut out of this flesh. If everything is connected, then we are obliged to introduce a cut, in art as in life. Otherwise, touching and being touched are indistinguishable, as when you clasp your hands together. Kuitca appropriates a concrete object, and so creates a gap in the flesh of the world, a void, a nothing where previously there had been something. It may be true that what makes us say that there had previously been something is the fact that now there is nothing. But perhaps Kuitca wants to reproduce the state of “everything” in this other scene. “I add roads, highways,” he said to me, his hands showing me how he draws the surplus. “And I also duplicate names of cities.” (Again, the proper name and the particularity of the duplication introduce ghosts.)

Much as there are elements of both conventional truth and falsity to these maps, the supplementary in them won't allow for an either-or proposition. You want to find a third way to account for such an in-between. Once more, consider Lacan, for whom this third instance is what he calls the *Real*. He would have written *ex-sistence*. The word itself means standing forth, emerging from, with the prefix emphasizing the exteriority, “extimacy” of the very scene. This is the terrain mapped by Kuitca.

The colors of the maps are striking, the very height rather impressive, and the lines that indicate the roads, rivers, and highways combine to form a very tight net, dense, resembling three cerebrums. Kuitca had a similar proposal at Documenta 9 in 1992. There his maps were painted on mattresses. While the surfaces were certainly clearer, the buttons of the mattresses—anchoring points—pierced and distorted the maps. But I will spare you the count of these maps; Kuitca has been doing them since 1989. □

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