

Interview by Berta Sichel on the occasion of the exhibition *Los caprichos del flujo. CUERPO*

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Is this a grant for producing a catalogue and an exhibition?

Yes, the programme is called *Iniciarte*, and it was created by the Regional Government of Andalusia to award visual arts production grants to young people under age 35. The grant covers the cost of producing an individual exhibition and an accompanying catalogue. The grantees are chosen based on a portfolio of their past work and an exhibition project summary. The installation being presented in Córdoba is actually the first in a series based on the purchase of photographs from online image banks.

What works will be featured in the show?

The exhibition will take place at Sala *Iniciarte Córdoba* in the spring of 2017. The project entitled *Los caprichos del flujo. CUERPO* [The Whims of Flow: Body] is an installation that merges two separate disciplines: visual arts and oriental feng shui philosophy.

The exhibition grew out of purchasing photos from online image banks, specifically *Istockphoto.com* and *Fotolia.com*, which have been enlarged and mounted directly on the wall. The photos don't cost that much, between two and eight euros, and I use them to develop an appropriationist photographic practice. The six photographs presented in the show are related to bodily relaxation and healing treatments, evoking the body as a simultaneously physical and spiritual whole. I print the photos in large formats to maintain their advertising status and confront the spectators' own bodies with those in the pictures.

During the second stage of the project, I contacted feng shui expert Beatriz Fernández and asked her to help me arrange the images and include other elements in the room. Beatriz's first step was to draw up a geomantic chart of the building that shows the different energy levels in each part of the exhibition hall. She sent me this

chart along with explanations to help me interpret it. Beatriz also gave me several recommendations on how foot traffic should flow through the space and on the distribution of materials, colours and forms, and I applied them when planning the layout and arrangement of the installation at Sala *Iniciarte Córdoba*. This preliminary work is presented at the gallery in a diptych entitled *Feng shui guidelines for occupying the Sala Iniciarte Córdoba*.

Working with Beatriz has changed my relationship with feng shui. At first, my idea was to apply a series of rules I'd found in feng shui books, mostly publications on interior decoration written to familiarise Western readers with that oriental method. When I was offered the chance to showcase my project at Sala *Iniciarte Córdoba*, I thought it would be good to enlist the assistance of an expert with practical knowledge of the technique, thereby taking a more process-oriented approach. Thanks to this collaboration, my exhibition was able to incorporate feng shui philosophy with the seriousness it deserves.

Can you elaborate on the idea of how photos purchased from image banks are connected to art and feng shui?

Your question goes right to the heart of this work, which is founded on three pillars: purchased images, art and feng shui. Before I explain how they're related, I'd like to clarify why I took an interest in image banks.

In the capitalist system, aesthetics have been instrumentalised by the advertising industry with the aim of making money flow more freely. Stock photography banks are part of this system, as a fast, inexpensive source of graphic material for media and advertising agencies. We might say that image banks are to advertising as prêt-à-porter is to the fashion industry: both are systems of

mass commercial production that offer products at low prices. It's no coincidence that Otto Bettmann created the first commercial image bank in the 1930s and the idea took off in the 1940s and 50s, right around the time that prêt-à-porter fashion appeared and became popular.

These image vending platforms are based on a system where photographers try to anticipate what kind of images media agencies and publicists will need in the immediate future. In order to make a profit, photographers have to take shots that will sell. I think this way of working, of trying to anticipate coming trends, combined with the demand for "taggable" images that can easily be associated with generic concepts like "massage", "hug" or "love", ends up making most photographs monosemic (having only one meaning) and hackneyed.

In this exhibition, I wanted to employ images that are normally used to sell products. That way, my work dialogues with the visual forms spawned by capitalism. These images are constructs that advocate certain lifestyles and present us with a specific outlook on reality. In order to understand any message, we must adjust our minds to the model we are given, and that's how our individual worlds are gradually constructed from the messages that circulate in them. The subjectivised ramifications of advertising messages go far beyond the basic insistence on buying a certain product. They create a residual zone where secondary ideas accumulate and gradually shape a dominant worldview.

When I transfer these commoditised images into the artistic arena, I think the values implicit in the images remain intact; I merely reposition the photos in a space that's more critical and analytical than everyday life. Altering the meaning of advertising images is nothing new; the Situationists did it decades ago. However, in this case, rather than erasing or overwriting the original message, I work with the existing advertisement to bring out an ironic subtext.

The third pillar of my proposal is the feng shui method. Like tai chi, acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine, the origins of feng shui can be found in Taoist philosophy. Both art and feng shui seek harmony through formal and conceptual order. By bringing this oriental technique into the exhibition space, I've sort of grafted one discipline onto the other. I find it fascinating how feng shui underwent a transformation when it entered Western culture. In the East it is considered an ancient, venerable philosophy, but in the West people tend to see it as a pseudo-science or a compendium of superstitious beliefs. This is because when it came to the Western world, it was modified to fit into existing professions like design, interior decorating and architecture.

Westernised feng shui and the purchased photographs both evince a simplification of content: in the first case, this was done to adapt a foreign cultural tradition to

existing disciplines, and in the case of the stock photos, the subject matter is simplified to make the images' meaning more obvious. Both are reworked with the intention of creating new standardised consumer products.

What is the conceptual framework of your practice at this juncture?

My latest works address the articulation of aesthetics in our capitalist regime. I've studied this topic extensively, from Fredric Jameson to the present day. Jameson's term "aesthetic populism" inspired me to think long and hard about how aesthetics are used in our time, and it planted the seed of my subsequent research.

In my working process, I've developed an interest in media studies; in recent months I've read authors like McLuhan and Jan Baetens and books like *Remediation: Understanding New Media* by Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin and *On Eros, Communication, Desire and Semio-capitalism* by Irmgard Emmelhainz.

Could you elaborate on the idea of "aesthetic populism" and how the authors you've mentioned, like McLuhan and Baetens, influenced this project, where one of your goals is to forge a link between art and feng shui?

My interpretation of that concept differs from Jameson's as expressed in his work *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. He uses it to refer to Las Vegas-style pastiche architecture. My focus is more on media and advertising and their constant attempts to grab our attention and get their messages across. We see a similar phenomenon in politics today, where certain prominent personalities say outrageous things because they want to be the centre of attention and increase their popularity. Applied to art, "aesthetic populism" makes me think of the different ways in which aesthetics are used: some works use aesthetics in a populist way, while others are more discreet about it.

I approach cultural objects from the premise of McLuhan's famous phrase, "The medium is the message", and then try to comprehend how the meaning of objects is altered by their geographical, cultural and inter-media shifts. In my early years as a student, I became interested in visual culture studies thanks to the magazine run by José Luis Brea. Reading that publication led me, several years later, to delve into the origins of media studies. McLuhan's work has inspired numerous interpretations and reworkings in connection with concepts like "virality" or "remediation", exploring the implications of our digital life for our human relationships and affective bonds.

The most appealing aspect of Baetens's work for me is his interdisciplinary vision and his analysis of cultural

history in relation to new media. He and Sémir Badir co-edited a special issue of the *Protée* journal about the consequences of digitising cultural objects. That issue contained a series of articles by various authors who examined the digitisation process from different angles. Baetens often uses the word “remediation” to describe the process of digitising analogue cultural objects and putting them into circulation on the internet.

Art and feng shui are disciplines that were forged over many centuries and have a geographical component. Both have undergone significant mutations due to the dynamics of circulation in the internet era and our global age in general. These changes have been analysed from the perspective of concepts such as transculturation or acculturation. Vernacular cultures, for instance, are treated as consumer products for tourists, often becoming caricatures of themselves, and the same thing happens in contemporary art. As a result, art across the globe is increasingly homogeneous.

How do you go about creating your works?

My works are usually the product of research. Research is the catalyst of my artistic intuition, and it gives me a foundation on which to build more complex works than I could ever achieve if I relied solely on observation.

In that process, I zoom in on certain objects that get my attention for one reason or another. Initially my attraction to those objects is irrational, but as I work I start to become more aware of my relationship with them. Although my creative process is, as I said, rooted in intuition, I always try to establish a conscious, reflective bond with the conceptual relationships I construct. When selecting the photographs to be included in *Los caprichos del flujo*, I always bore in mind that the five or six images I chose had to delimit a specific area and revolve around a single theme. I knew from the beginning that the representation of the body would not be associated exclusively with the medical notion of anatomy. My selection contains an image of a spa, one of alternative medicine, a close-up of a Japanese garden, two of therapeutic massages and one anatomical close-up. Each reflects a different style of photographic “writing”: some were shot at close range, others might be considered portraits, and some are closer to documentary photography.

In this respect, there is an entire school of thought related to photographic writing. It’s a complex process, because stock photo banks contain a huge variety of images. Illustrative photography is the most prevalent, but it’s the least interesting type for my work because its meaning is so unambiguous that the possibilities of *détournement* are very limited.

Also, because I work with objects that have physical connotations, material meaning is another fundamental

idea in my creations. Material meaning is linked to the genealogy of uses of objects and materials, and its articulation shapes our subjective worldview. In the case of this exhibition, centred on digital images used in advertising, I felt it would be appropriate to print on blue back paper—the same kind used on roadside hoardings—with the intention of keeping the images’ material status close to the advertising world.

As an artist, how would you like audiences to react when they see your works?

I have a more conceptual notion of art, and therefore my greatest hope is that the audience will find my proposals interesting. I see the exhibition hall as an analytical space, and I assume that visitors will approach my work in that same spirit. But this isn’t always the case, especially among visitors not familiar with the languages of contemporary art, so sometimes you have to guide or educate the audience in the gallery.

I know some people will assess my work based solely on their first impression when they see it. But I don’t believe art should be approached in that way. This is largely due to my critical view of how advertising uses visual material for erotic purposes. My current position is not to deny the poetic use of images but to regard them from the perspective of a critical, politicised regime.

Which artists have influenced you the most?

Of all the exhibitions I’ve seen in recent years, two made a particularly strong impression on me: a solo show dedicated to Mark Leckey and another of Simon Denny’s work, both held at Wiels in Brussels. I love how Leckey mixes and mingles advertising, historical objects, material technology and mass culture. Leckey uses remediation by playing with multiple layers from different eras and settings. What appeals to me about Denny’s work is his diagrammatic aesthetic linked to graphic design and how he inserts his documentary research in devices that are both instructive and amenable.

I recently discovered the work of Shana Moulton. I really identify with her ironic/humorous tone and the New Age vibes emanating from her installations. In some ways, Moulton’s work reminded me of *Los caprichos del flujo*. As a native Andalusian, I feel close to the work of Pedro G. Romero and his interest in seeking a complex analysis of the quotidian in popular culture, as well as the work being done in the field of the arts and critical studies at the International University of Andalusia.

I also feel an affinity with artists who explore historical events, like Vincent Meessen and Sven Augustijnen, and others like Patricia Esquivias and Duncan Campbell who focus on the dimension and circulation of cultural objects.

Your website shows that you are also a curator. How do you juggle both activities?

I take a theoretical approach to art, so the boundary between the two activities is blurred.

For example, the show I'm presenting in Córdoba could be considered a curatorial project featuring the work of six different photographers, although that would not really be an accurate interpretation of the exhibition.

Whether I work as an artist or as a curator depends on the role I play in a project. Sometimes playing the role of curator gives me better perspective to make certain decisions, and sometimes it's the other way round. As an

artist you often get so wrapped up in the creative process that you need fresh pair of eyes to determine how the work is going to be received by audiences. The curator analyses the material to be exhibited from a certain distance, and that distance creates a new dialectical layer that enriches the perspective of the works.

I have the feeling that one of the two activities will eventually take precedence over the other in my career, though I still don't know which one will come out on top.

Translated by Deydre B. Jerry.







INDICACIONES DESDE EL FENG SHUI
PARA OCUPAR LA SALA INICIARTE CÓRDOBA
por Beatriz Fernández

El feng shui es un antiguo sistema filosófico chino de origen taoísta basado en la ocupación consciente y armónica del espacio, con el fin de lograr de este una influencia positiva sobre las personas que lo ocupan. Es parte del llamado shenronghua (神農化) - conocimiento llamado cinco misterios de la cultura china, que trata sobre cosas misteriosas, secretas o imposibles de ver. Su territorio de acción se sitúa en la frontera de dos mundos: el de la tierra -denominado ken kai- visible y físico, y el del cielo -denominado yu kai- desconocido, invisible y vibrátil.

En occidente, el feng shui a devenido una técnica utilizada comúnmente para estudiar las construcciones, aportando unas pautas de diseño en edificaciones y jardines. La técnica utiliza variables como la ubicación, la morfología de la construcción y el entorno que la envuelve para proponer una correcta distribución de los espacios funcionales. Con estas pautas se pretende mejorar las vibraciones armónicas, y así, la habitabilidad de los espacios.

El presente estudio de la sala IniciarTE Córdoba ha sido realizado por **Beatriz Fernández**, presidenta de la Asociación de Técnicos y Profesionales de Feng Shui (www.atpLes). ATPF agrupa a profesionales de la arquitectura, el diseño y el interiorismo que aplican la técnica feng shui en campos relacionados con la construcción, la reforma de edificios y la decoración. ATPF es una asociación donde tanto profesionales como particulares pueden dirigirse para contactar con expertos de esta técnica milenaria.





Dptych “*Feng shui guidelines for occupying the Sala Iniciar Córdoba*”:

http://www.nanoorte.com/files/diptych_feng_shui_eng.pdf