



Emilio Tarazona

Droughts, Precipitation, Overflows... Aspects of the Work of Juan Javier Salazar Seen Vis-à-Vis Climate Change and Socioeconomic Change in Contemporary Peru¹

“(...)

All poems end up the same.

Smashed to pieces on a dark mountain

That wasn't on the charts.

(...)”

MARIO MONTALBETTI, “Objeto y fin del poema”, in: *El amor es un arma para dos*,

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IDENTIFICATION OF previously unnoticed areas within the context of contemporary South American art, a phenomenon from the last decade, would appear to create an expectation of disrupting, making vulnerable and in some cases completely removing the hegemonic narratives proposed by history up to now from the region's territories. Those being configured are divergent versions of that history (often related to non-object-focused artistic proposals) and in this recent spate of critical readings, mapping and naming have become operations as complex as achieving theoretical consistency in relation to experience, here understood as unexpected territory and native presence not yet contacted.

Every mapping and naming operation is, after all, a mode of representation in itself, and is ultimately revealed to be a concrete political agenda. A

Left: Juan Javier Salazar, *Supervisions: before/during/after* (1977-2006). Sala Pancho Fierro, Lima. Curator: Emilio Tarazona, April 2006 (exhibition's view with the installation *Náufragos* on the floor)

number of the previously proposed models, nevertheless, continue to be present and for many it is far from simple to go against custom or a consensus in favor of thinking along the lines of apparent positions, strongly inoculated in relation to other parts of the planet, e.g., East and West; North and South; first-, second-, third- and fourth-world; or center and periphery. These are mappings on the fly, often lacking proximity to the topographies that emerge from the margins, topographies that are always found everywhere.

Faced with the decline of all these tensions that have defined and continue to define the secondary role of these civilizations, the task seems also to be breaking up the dominant civilization's monologue and changing the system that it imposes. It implies configuring a new geopolitical cognitive structure of relationships within a field where a single epistemological perspective has been inscribed as the guiding principle of knowledge. As Walter Mignolo points out,

The West has been the only geo-historical region that is at once part of the world's classifications and the lone perspective that enjoys the privilege of coming up with its own categories, based upon which the rest of the world is described, classified, understood and "made to develop".²

This perspective has been widely replicated in an inherited, interiorized, and is still mostly present in the colonial mentality of the dominant sectors of dependent nations, even during their time as (in) dependent republics. The presence of these internal social strata and the position the individual adopts before them—emerging from the status in which he originally found himself—constitute a deliberate political stance.

Eluding the privileged status of inhabiting a place of far-reaching enunciation would seem to be the option that Peruvian artist Juan Javier Salazar exercised at some point, since after his first appearance on the cultural scene he decided to exile himself for some years on land he acquired in Cieneguilla, the far eastern outskirts of Lima, where he devotes himself to a semi-rural way of life and keeps a safe distance from the art circuits of the capital city trying to flee from a State that would soon catch him up given the quick expansion of the city. The dislocation implied by the margin or the border between a civilization and what is considered internally

“outside” confronts the status of belonging in a space, to which the artist returned years later, to present retrospective show in a municipal gallery in Lima’s prosperous Miraflores district—the space to which he does not claim entirely to belong. Thus, faced with the question of whether he is culprit of a sort of “class betrayal”, Salazar declares, perhaps speaking ironically about the ability that exists within the most favored social sectors (whom one supposes to be associated with white/European heritage or, in any case, with a clearly colonial mentality) that he has decided to avoid involvement involved with with any other spheres of the nation’s reality:

[...] I think we Peruvian bourgeois, or mestizos, always have one foot on the next boat out. [Pause] In any case, I gave up thinking about categories a long time ago.³

For Mingolo as well, it is the border status that opens the possibility of a questioning of the dominant epistemological criteria of contemporary society, and points toward the construction of a new intercultural arena capable not only of changing discourses, maps or possible cartographies, but as well, of changing the cultural conditions from which such cartographies and narratives are constantly founded and instituted. An established dialogue cannot be engaged by only one of its interlocutors taking for granted for granted the agency of his place of enunciation. South America should stop being the extreme West, a margin that inclines to the center, and should posit its periphery status as a center in a new world geopolitics, but without renouncing its peripheral status.

South and North are no longer geographical locations nor do they correspond to supposed economic models—developed or otherwise—but rather to political positions that tend to establish a post-capitalist economic model that is more integrated or open. The proposed multilateral model must alter the conditions with which the world has been politically structured within the imaginary of domination.

What is presented here is a cluster of ideas in the process of formation. A sum of intuitions, which, revealed and commented upon here, I hope will allow me to strengthen preliminary foci, that would lead to a more ambitious project of writing that will insist on the same topic. I hope to include aspects of the trajectory of an artist whose work, in spite of his

influential and decisive presence in Peru's contemporary art scene, is virtually unknown in South American and other international circles. It is a contribution that, in its way, seeks to displace both art history's privileged place of enunciation as well as the status of academic discourse when the latter presents itself as impenetrably erudite and cosmopolitan. This new reference point must also be recognized as one step within a differential political project, where the placement of borders is propitious to the permanent reformulation of the very same thinking I am advancing. Today more than ever, the landscape is not fixed and transforms even more quickly than any theoretical apparatus intends to sketch it.

To reverse the power of consensually assumed discourses and world order is a task and an attitude in relation to which one of Salazar's works could summarize part of a political project in favor of heterotopia. It functions along with other works of a similar resonance, produced by other artists in other countries, to fashion a differential paradigm. It is a mass-produced object that, in the form of a ceremonial scepter, the artist calls *Invierta en la Selva* (Invest in the Forest). The object represents a tree which roots, like jumbled up springs are found at the top of it, while along its somewhat circular base, painting takes on a representation of the sky with the tops of this and other neighboring trees serving as a sort of support. Below the roots, another circular form divides the subterranean world of above from the rest of the visible world, that contorts downward. Conceived as a crook for stopping time and transforming reality, the work suggests an attempt to recast order and bring about a collapse of existing organizational structures, from a perspective that opposes the consensually hegemonic one. It also positions itself in favor of investment—in the economic sense—in new spaces and natural resources that mainstream commercial interests destroy and squander: medicinal and food products that exist in the Peruvian jungle (such as cocona, camu-camu, uña de gato, aguaje, etc.), that are even difficult to find in Lima, except in certain regional establishments. The investment would imply real circulation of resources and local production, whose current absence stands out as a system failure. In the more strictly artistic area, Salazar calls attention to the tremendous boredom that seeing the same names of local artists, repeated decade after decade, elicits. In a personalized version of Warhol's well-known motto the artist wrote in the mid-90s:

There are five billion people and if you could nourish yourself your entire life on each one's 15 best minutes, the world would be fascinating. In the West they thought the world was flat and then they discovered America and believed it was round, but in reality it exhibits a tendency to flatten—they're making it flat all over again. There is brutal mass media, too many people, and the result is a dreadful mediocrity.⁴

So this rewriting of the South's contemporary art that I initially pointed out seeks to change the homogenizing path of a fixed track in order to produce encounters without a mainstream. It's not about making the river wider, but rather interrupting its main flow and even generating different intersections and paths. The propitious gesture present in the copper object called *Invierta en la Selva* notwithstanding (present as well in other works produced by the artist), and even emphasizing its cultural reverberations or magical properties, does not regress to the idea of South American art seeking to recover the fantastic through the production of romantic, non-historical and absurdist depoliticised modalities of art which were in fashion at the end of the eighties and nineties. Salazar remains committed to immediate (and even circumstantial) referents proper to the public sphere, inscribing symbolic (but not only) elements in it as a response to specific control and domination powers, both local and not.

Shipwreck in the Desert

With the end of the fleeting if intense collective experiences in which Salazar participated at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 80s within *Grupo Paréntesis* (1979) and the *EPS Huayco* workshop (1980-81), the artist established his regular patterns of exhibition in Lima with an emblematic show entitled *La grasa y el sistema* (The Grease and the System), undertaken in 1981 at the now defunct Galería La Rama Dorada. It is at this solo show that the first version of what might be considered his most well known and commented upon work, in paint on wood, was presented. Entitled *Perú país del mañana* (Peru: The Country of the Tomorrow) the image, spread over various plywood boards (a thin, flexible wood), involves several vignettes where a significant group of official portraits of Peruvian presidents, starting from the nation's independence in 1821, unfolds in chronological order in a sketchy and quick fashion. In spite of what the satirical progressive slogan suggests, the work does not look to the promise of a nation and its prosperous future. On the contrary, it

constitutes a reflection on the past and the present: Salazar adds a speech balloon to each image containing the word *mañana* (tomorrow), as an a customary way—some would say a very Peruvian way—of maintaining an evasive attitude with regard to today. It's a caustic reference to the procrastination that has characterized the nation's modernity project since its beginnings, as well as an emblematic synthesis of governmental impotence throughout Peru's history.

Nevertheless, it is by means of another instance that such interpretation became sharper. The artist decided to place fried eggs made of plaster and yellow paint throughout the small gallery, separated and broken up along the floor. These eggs were to be installed a few days after the opening, as if they were an almost involuntary and impromptu response to an irritated and scathing review of the exhibition published by a local magazine.⁴ Perhaps the intention was to take up the clumsiness and extreme precariousness that was already present in the exhibited works—in spite of the fact that some framed prints were also displayed. It was a necessary risk, if indeed the intention was to make an omelette. It also obliged the viewer to negotiate the gallery space like someone who moves through a minefield of delicate obstacles.

The same layout of objects was taken up again in 1985, when the artist presented a new exhibition, this time at the Galería Trapecio. A figure of a character immersed in water was included in prints and transposed to



El Niño phenomenon, 1983 (Press photo from Alfredo Márquez's personal archive)

wooden fretworks silhouettes once again occupying the walls and floor of the gallery. The first pieces in this installation were eloquently made with from the remains of a small, discarded container the artist had been given. Thus it is that, along with the image, Salazar's interest in rainfall consistently emerges. The artist produces an iconic synthesis that makes to similar photographs that the two years before were published by the mainstream press, in relation to the brutal effects of the so called El Niño weather phenomenon all through Peru, and in particular the drama of the residents of the north of the country trying to rescue their belongings from the flood that affected their territory.

Among those photographs, the artist remembered in particular an image where one of the victims made his way across the water carrying a religious painting over the shoulder. Many of the newspaper articles covering the tragedy recorded similar situations. Nevertheless, in the works by Salazar [see page 128], he erased the features of this character's face and the painting is turned into a blank canvas. In other cases, the canvas is cut out, leaving only the frame, and in other cases the canvas has been substituted by a box of beer bottles—who knows if they're empty or full. Juan Javier Salazar stated: "I want to transmit the sensation and the idea that the average Peruvian is a shipwreck victim who saves himself and whatever else he can save, no matter how."⁶ With hindsight, it is not difficult to guess that the statement also alludes to the artist himself, and might be a veritable portrait of those willing to rescue the memory of the artistic experiences of the recent past from the river of oblivion.

Image published in: Caretas 740, Lima: March 21st, 1983, p. 68



It goes without saying that the feeling of a shipwreck is much more extended. From the beginning of the 80s, Peru was convoluted by civil war, declared on the state by the forces of subversion. Violent encounters between the army and unofficial armed movements, the source of civilian massacres and exterminations, were accompanied by the darkest and most critical moments in the national economy; there was hyperinflation and food shortages.

But before returning to that, let's dive deeper into the matter at hand. Understood as a change in oceanic and meteorological conditions, the El Niño phenomenon (formally known as the Southern Oscillation, or ENSO) is an intermittent event in which the temperature of the East Pacific rises considerably. It occurs when trade winds that move from east to west abate and the slight difference between the El Niño Current (which has a higher temperature) causes it to shift on top of the Humboldt Current (which is cooler). Its consequences are seen as well in climatic conditions in Australia, Indonesia and the Horn of Africa. In the South Pacific it kills off fish species and spurs migrations (of anchovies, for example) and brings in other tropical species like dorados, barriletes, tuna, manta rays, sharks and langoustines, among others. The change in water temperature also produces torrential rains, river flooding and, in other areas, drought. In 1983, precipitation contributed to the destruction of built up urban areas, affecting irrigation systems, ruining vast harvest areas and halting fishing industries dedicated to the extraction of specific marine species not only for local consumption but for exportation as well. All of the above were the source of widespread human and economic loss.

El Niño's final, devastating presence in 1997-8 made the eyes of the world converge in the Kyoto meeting, in an attempt to bring about a drastic reduction in greenhouse gases that play an important role in nature's increasingly violent phenomena as well as a questioning of what role the behavior of dominant civilization played in the radical nature of these changes as well as their exacerbation since the Industrial Revolution.

Salazar's installation was once again featured in a retrospective, undertaken in 1990, in what was then the Centro Cultural de la Municipalidad de Miraflores. The title is a wish in the form of a doubt or a premonition: *Parece que va a llover* (Looks Like It's Going to Rain). Beyond insisting on

the tragedy that had been experienced years before in the north of Peru, these same broken-up figures become a commentary fully intends to allude to Lima and go against the grain in relation to its particular meteorological conditions. For the artist, the show's objective is ritualistic and it seeks to alter present conditions: despite its high humidity, Lima is a coastal city where even a drop or rain is seen rarely. In certain months, there may be light drizzle or showers, but nothing more. "We live in a cloudy city," Salazar said at the time, "where it hasn't rained in twenty years...the government is just like the weather. An exorcism is needed,"⁷ and rain is taken here as a sign of regeneration, of cycles that close, in order to allow the opening of another. The rain's absence is practically a metaphor for the lack of wealth circulation or distribution, wealth being permanently concentrated in Lima.⁸

Years before the republican era, physician Hipólite Unanue studied the geographical and meteorological characteristics of the city and established the influences that its physical space and climate exerted over its inhabitants. Among other ideas, he pointed out that Lima's citizens are susceptible to disease and digestive problems and, with regard to mood, a disposition to melancholy stands out which, in advanced stages, turns into procrastination.⁹ Salazar might subscribe to Unanue's opinion on this point and his stance is to invoke and gather the will to produce a counter-current to the effects of the weather in Lima. The project is rolled out like a sort of propitiatory act or active influence that tries to reverse the overall atmospheric conditions about which meteorological conditions make an effective and illustrative metaphor. The social, political and economic crisis—in addition to the violence upsetting various cities of the interior, and Lima, at that point—had left an enormous lack of self esteem in the air as well as in the urban dweller, and they also fomented an inability extract oneself from the situation. Defenseless and anaesthetized, civil society largely suffered from hopelessness and scant energy for social mobilization, due to repression and day-to-day terrorism. "Seven million crybabies in the middle of the desert" is the description of the city that occurs to Cuco, the protagonist of a short film the artist made and presented as the centerpiece of a his 1990 show. Nevertheless, its aggressive verbal image also describes the rest of the country: dense, sad, devoid of any revitalizing processes or always-present natural purification ritual. Or in Salazar's words, "the myth of the shipwreck in the desert."¹⁰

If it is certain, as critic Gustavo Buntinx once pointed out, that a drought affects the harvest in other parts of the country at the same time the show is underway,¹¹ ending the drought in Lima implies inverting the extended sign of disaster with a real flood. The same author points out a similar implication when addressing the name taken by the *Taller EPS Huayco* at the beginning of the 1980s. *Huayco* is a Quechua word “that alludes to avalanches that suddenly descend from high ground to lowlands—such as Lima, for example—with regenerative violence that fertilizes the earth at the same time it devastates.”¹²

A Climate of Change

In effect, there is a trenchant component within the formula proposed in opposition to malaise: a caustic and personal sense of humor that is added to a clear critical stance in all of Juan Javier Salazar’s work. This element is directed indiscriminately to national realities, cultural policy, the local art circuit and even Salazar’s personal life. In spite of that caustic and insistent displacement toward the ridiculous, into which he drags his immediate surroundings (currently the growth of collecting and the internal art market have begun to stand out in his work), this has come to be unexpectedly popular, and has become a kind of contemporary classic. This hasn’t created an appreciation that would make contact with mass, popular and middle class audience any less frequent. And it is this audience to whom the artist prefers to direct his work and from whom his work has received notable acceptance. In other words, acquiring a few of his pieces is in no way onerous.

Quoting a different author, in his book *El arte de vivir del arte* (The Art of Living Art), Felipe Ehrenberg writes of the difference between PA (público activo, or “active public” and thus a frequent buyer) and PP (público pasivo, “passive public,” and largely the audience that is gathered in a symposium like this): “Although the active public may seem at first the more desirable one—it is the one that recommends artists—out true public will always be the passive public.”¹³ To date, Salazar has adapted to every possible economy and tends to distribute his work as much in galleries and public auctions as along city streets, without ever renouncing that informality in commercial exchange that allows for acquisition in installments, through bargaining and even as a bonus thrown in with additional purchases. His corrosive candidness has caused him run-ins and

fallings-out with not a few individuals from the still small and endogamic visual arts scene in Lima and for the same reason, in spite of its clear acceptance and an increase in certain circles regarding an appreciation of his work, Salazar does not find every door opened. But one of the questions I would like to pose is which are the spaces where his attempt to transform the national inimical atmosphere, at the very same time the country undergoes substantial changes in practically every community and interest group, take place?

There are psychological—not just economic—indexes of the development Peru has achieved in recent years. Self-esteem, confidence and optimism have represented a major shift and, moreover, exert a decisive influence over a significant part of the population. This is particularly true for that sector that remains better placed to benefit from the vigorous pace of economic activity and has seen its buying power increased. Such an atmospheric condition, consolidated in the twenty-first century, is mostly based on the supposed stability that has resulted from the end of civil war and the dictatorship, but more to the point because of the way Peru incorporated into global neoliberalism.¹⁴ The confidence and optimism lead one to think that unlike in other countries, Peru isn't so frightened of the threat posed by the global financial crisis. Or more precisely, it feels up to the challenge of facing and overcoming it. All this has strengthened the visual arts scene in the last ten years, with an increase in collecting as well.

However, my goal is to undermine at least in part the foundations of such optimism. With hindsight, the recipe itself reveals betraying: the conditions of subversive violence in Peru persists, and democracy has become a disguise for new forms of domination that lack effective participation. Wild capitalism has been imposed on a specific country, as part of a transformation process necessary to modify the internal logic of a similarly oppressive, unfair and devastating system. Doubtless in Peru, as Martín Beaumont, the National Director of Oxfam, has pointed out, the pace of economic growth in recent years has not had a corresponding effect on the reduction of poverty, which develops at a much slower rate, and inequality appears not to have been affected in the least.¹⁵ There is no real political will for poverty amelioration or the reduction of inequality and the former is almost always a spontaneous consequence of growth in GDP and

general per-capita product. Persistent inequality could feed discontent and affect sustained economic growth in just a few years, at the same time self-esteem and confidence might be a kind of barbiturate that leaves us in a pretty little boat, sailing along on a sea that might grow choppy; we end up being anaesthetized consumers with unexpected access to credit which, presumably, allows us to participate in a much-desired developed-world wellbeing, witnesses to the construction industry booms (and real estate speculation) that have radically transformed Lima's urban landscape.

As demonstrated by the earthquake that struck southern Peruvian cities in August 2007, a lack of state planning and the social relations to which human beings are subjected (world wide), as well as precarious and unstable housing conditions, instead of mitigating nature's destruction, lend it greater power, and those who were already impoverished before the ground started shaking end up even more affected. Inequality also alludes to the distance and even divergence existing between the state and the masses who try to make their way through life amid the unemployment or underemployment to which the aforementioned work by Salazar makes direct reference.

To be sure, *Recuerdos de la lluvia* (Memories of the Rain), the 40-minute film Salazar presented and produced in 1990 lays out a fictional history that the artist constructs based on real (or nearly real) events from May 1979, during a commemoration of Peru's Combate de Iquique, a battle fought against Chile in 1879, a solitary though significant Peruvian victory before overall defeat in the so called "Guerra del Pacífico". The historical framework of the years in question was that of a government in transition: with much fanfare, a series of events were presented whose culminating and most solemn moment was to take place in Lima's Plaza Grau, directly in front of the statue of the Peruvian Wartime Navy's admiral and main war hero, later killed in combat during the same conflict. In attendance were two Peruvian presidents (General Francisco Morales Bermúdez, then in office, and Fernando Belaunde, who would succeed him) as well as naval squadrons, cabinet ministers, members of the Constitutional Assembly, representatives from numerous foreign nations, as well as political, religious and military officials of every rank. That same night, once the official ceremonies and its speeches, demonstrations, laying of wreaths, etc., concluded, a drunken chauffeur crashed into the monument without

causing any major damage, in light of which the authorities immediately began to dispel any suspicion of terrorism in the press.

For Salazar, though, the anecdote becomes a spectacular event that's loaded with implications. The snarrative of the short film fictionalizes one day in the life of a taxi driver that ends with his car smashing into the monument. From the beginning, the expressed identification of the artist with the driver—whose vehicle becomes a sudden floral offering during the story—represents the desire to bring about an encounter between two realities that never touch. In the end, the State, in its overarching attempts at self-glorification, is what de-naturalizes the homage and expropriates in honor of its official values, diminishing every kind of participatory impulse. A sailor who died in combat for his country is disassociated from the worker who fights battles every day within the subsistence economy, where everyone ends up being a shipwreck victim. The fissure in the official anniversary, converted into time off for citizens, is the continual break between the State and civil society.

This powerful metaphor that Salazar presented in March 2000 as a part of a show entitled *Nunca digas siempre* (Never Say Forever) announces the constant presence of the fissure. It largely has to do with underwater landscape paintings that are overwritten with verbal inscriptions that express conditional propositions, where it's necessary that something happen for the statements to come true. *Nadando en un mar de incertidumbres* (Swimming in a Sea of Uncertainty) is the series' title. In one of these canvases, the artist includes, toward the bottom of the image, the shadow of an airplane that is sinking in the ocean, at the same time, in the foreground, a school of fish is displaced in the same direction. Broken up by the passing fish, the legend *A veces / Parece / De alguna manera / En otro momento* (Sometimes / It Seems / Somehow / At another time) is enunciated, with the addition of an onomatopoeic echo: *Qui-zass* (Per-hapsss).

Juan Javier Salazar, detalles de *Swimming in a Sea of Uncertainty* (details), 2000



The plane refers to a previously painted Salazar diptych, from which only one canvas remains. The theme here is an allusion to a tragedy from the end of 1987. A Fokker aircraft belonging to the navy fell into coastal waters during a forced attempt at a water landing after failing to land at Lima's Jorge Chávez airport due to technical failures during approach. The navy plane was transporting the young Peruvian team members of an important local soccer team (Club Alianza Lima) from Pucallpa after a victorious match that had given it a tournament lead.

In fact, the pilot was the only survivor, rescued by Army airforce units along with the bodies and the remains of the aircraft and offering the press a story that would occupy weeks of headlines and television news broadcasts. In the tragedy, Salazar sees a metaphor for what is happening in Peru: leaders stay in place and survive while the people helplessly sink. But the idea alluded to in both paintings, a frequent circumstance in political history, was singularly prophetic for Peru that year, just a few months after the show took place. It was the most unstable moment in Alberto Fujimori's dictatorship, an announcement of his imminent downfall. With his chief accomplice—ex-advisor and Chief of the Peruvian Intelligence Service, Vladimiro Montesinos—facing legal prosecution and fleeing the country, the president abandoned his duties after only two months of taking office for his third consecutive term in a fraudulently won election. After a hurried exodus to Brunei, while still officially the head of state, Fujimori took exile in Japan and sent his resignation by fax to the Peruvian Congress. The title of Salazar's work is the same as the inscription on the canvases: *Solamente el piloto / Siempre* (Just the Pilot / Each and Every Time).

A Better Oriented Optimism

Nevertheless, as the title of his 2000 exhibition suggests, “you never have to say always.” While the break between government and society seems perennially impossible to breach, legal processes and sentences that ex-President Fujimori is currently fighting, since his extradition, while they may not bridge that gap, do not appear to keep the ruling classes permanently safe, and have largely cleared the air of impunity and corruption—the perennially gray skies that cloud the spirit and lead to malaise.¹⁵ But as economist Félix Jiménez notes, the generalized idea that “in economics [...] we have no president, since from the nineties the economy has been on auto-pilot” is wrong.¹⁷