

# **I and Thou:<sup>\*</sup> Processes of abandonment and anorexic purification in Cesar Trasobares' new sculptures**

Published in *MIAMI ART PAPER*, March 1996, Vol. 1 No. 1, by Ambrosino Gallery, Coral Gables, 1996

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Ensuing that rare, purified moment in which an artist changes direction, deciding to go against (his own as well as society's) expectations, at times surprising even himself - is, for me, one of the most intriguing experiences involved in the encounter with artists. Being present at the scene of these crossroad moments; in those critical key-points in the personal and artistic development of an artist, those unique moments from which far reaching transformations in the thought as well as the stylistic direction are derived - this is the greatest profit I can gain from my profession. As an accidental passerby, I had the chance to experience such a crossroad event in Cesar Trasobares' artistic development, and from this point of view I would like to propose my reading of his new, surprising body of works exhibited here.

The point of departure for the discussion of these works is abandonment. A less dramatic word would be refinement. In both cases, it is the outcome of an anorexic process - a visual diet during which narrative, local, political, ethnic, representative, iconographic, biographical, theatrical and emotional elements have been removed from the menu; all these have been compressed and squeezed, as it were, into the wood and marble boards, reduced to two material elements only, perfected into an ascetic minimalist choreography of designed structural shapes in natural colors of wood and marble. One may talk about an abandonment of color, of a personal handwriting; an abandonment of a wealth of materials, of the very practice of making; abandonment of slack, loose, soft elements in favor of an impressive demonstration of

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\* This essay was inspired by Martin Buber's dialogical or "I-Thou" philosophy. See: Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (translated by Ronald Gregor Smith), Macmillan Publishing Company, New York 1987.

perfection and smoothness, in favor of the universal beauty of the pure shape. This process of refinement and purification is like walking on the edge. It invites questions regarding the causes that had led to it, reflections on the meaning of abandonment and a search for the answers in the personal biography. This isn't the place to go into speculations of that sort. I will only say that if there was a sense of impasse or crisis here, Trasobares has emerged upright and strengthened, devoid of sentimentality and nostalgia, introverting to find his answers in the intense focusing on the sculptural act.

In an era which treats beauty with suspicion, taking it as a sign of the cancellation of logic in the face of temptation, as a decorative weakness or a political incorrectness - in the sense of refraining from dealing with "real life" - encountering the beauty of Trasobares' new sculptures was not easy for me. The ascetic, simple beauty they radiate is almost erotic; it is an existing, rather than mediating beauty, in the sense of "it's being there". The fascination rendered by the beauty of the shapes and the formal and material set of relations took me back to the texts of the theoretician Dave Hickey, who has recently attempted to reintroduce the rhetoric of "beauty" and the "beautiful" into the current artistic discourse and bring the work of art into a tempting, disconcerting position of accessibility. In his texts he tries to redeem art from the preoccupation with the political and the institutional, challenging the discussion which shifts the viewer's attention from art itself.<sup>1</sup> This act of shifting the viewer's attention back to "art itself", especially by someone for whom the preoccupation with the political and the institutional has been at the core of his artistic work, to the extent of exhaustion, may be interpreted in a positive reading as a radical act, and in an austere reading as a kind of relinquishment, reconciliation, or simply giving up as part of maturing.

Without going into the ethical aspects involved in Trasobares' crucial decisions, one may say that we are witnessing here a conscious choice of a lean, naked, economical structural image, that at first sight is read as a remnant of high-modernistic formalism, free of any content-oriented intentions, and only a more profound examination extracts from it metaphorical elements which pull in the direction of silence, passivity, solitude and introversion.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, Art issues Press, Los Angeles, 1993.

A closer look will reveal that the minimalist expression, strict and austere as it may be, also makes it possible to convey to the viewer the sense of yearning for the unreachable in a no less-lyrical manner. Any discussion of the chair sculptures exhibited here will be navigated, from now on, by an entangled web of metaphors which occupy the twilight zone between rhetoric and poetics. Rhetoric deals, among other things, with classification. In the case of sculpture, it is based on a historical discussion and on what is called the formalist aspect of the artistic discourse (in this context one can talk about the link of these sculptures to modernist sculpture). Poetics invites the metaphor into its realm. The chair as a trivial, ordinary, mundane object, devoid of aura, which has been dispossessed of its function in the practical sphere and placed naked and bare in the gallery space, is charged at once with a metaphorical meaning. This is not exactly the case of Trasobares, since his is a carefully structured chair, not a ready-made. However, in principle, one may say that any sculpture which adopts the contour lines of furniture embeds something of the delusive surrealist sensitivity, in the sense of metamorphosis; that is, an object whose production circumstances have changed, thus changing its context too.

The chair, formally defined as a structure with a back and a seat standing on the ground, is a central motif in the dialectics inherent in the relations of signifier-signified. The person who was supposed to sit on it is present in his absence, thus the chair is a signifier which the signified clings to, as an extension of the self. The anthropomorphic nature of the chair is suggested by the legs, the seat, the back; by its symmetrical qualities and vertical erectness. In this sense, it is convenient to read Trasobares' chairs as human figures (male and female?), whose juxtaposition expresses a conflict or a dialogue of some kind.

The spare choreography, which dictates the positioning of the chairs in space, determines the nature of the dialogue and dictates the kind of energies transmitted between the pairs of sculptures. This choreography relies on two visual principles: duality and symmetry. The chair-like structures are grounded, pushed to the horizontal. When negating for a moment the metaphorical meanings and the utilitarian aspects derived from the very choice of the chair motif, it is possible to observe in this layout a crisscross pattern of horizontal and vertical abstraction; horizontality which is close-to-the-ground confronted with vertical

(urban? monumental?) erections of various heights (of the chair's back).

The long and divided structure of the space leads the viewer, as it were, to a kind of atrium - a sacred section, an altar. In the frontal section of the space there are four sculptural units, comprised of pairs of sculptures and ten framed drawings hanging on the wall. The chairs always function as carriers, as bases supporting other objects (blocks of marble), usually located around the seat which is, in turn, divided horizontally and/or vertically. The marble blocks, which serve as "cushions", bear geometrical (square, conic, rectangular) and organic (laurels, tears) shapes in accordance with the symbolic meaning charged in them. The colors have also been carefully picked: pinks versus blacks, opaque versus fleshy, off-white alongside the pale milkiness of the wood. A symbolic positioning of the two chairs facing one another – *Your Beef My Laurels* versus *Your Laurels My Beef*, or *Four Laurels Two Tears* versus *Two Laurels Four Tears* – feelings versus achievements; personal encounters: who suffers more, who is happier; *I and Thou*; a mechanism of psychology; interpersonal relations; analyst and patient; man and woman; man and man.

Situated in the passage between the two parts of the gallery are six chair-columns like bodyguards, sentries. Their sequential placement in the narrow part of the gallery's neck creates a feeling of some kind of corridor leading to a climax. The high seats which are discordant with any calculation of human engineering and eliminate any possibility for practical use, are also divided into a grid of shelves populating geometrical and organic marble articles, possibly abstract objects, possibly a schematization of body organs. The elevation of the seats brings to mind an exalted throne, a totem-like object, elevated to monumental dimensions and charged with mythical-ritualistic meanings which dwarf the person confronting it. The rear section, the atrium area, populates two table sculptures - the result of combining two chairs facing one another: one bearing a "feminine" object, the other a "masculine" one. On the far end, in the enclave, there is a pile of more than thirty units of organic-shaped marbles - possibly laurels, possibly tears - a homage to the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres who recently passed away at the age of 38. The achievements, as well as the tears, are carved in a flesh-colored stone.

The decrease in the scale of emotionality with which Trasobares looks at things today is conspicuous, especially in light of his "Cuban" works from twenty years ago. In order to understand how radical his move is, how extreme is the decision he made in striving towards the specific qualities, towards the zero point of shapes and materials, one must go back to the raft motif, which had been charged by him as a political symbol of exile, long before it became commonplace as the ultimate overused icon of Cuban art. Moreover, one has to go back to the series of works related to the *Quinceanera* - a Cuban initiation ceremony for girls - which had been described by him through an archaeological-anthropological approach, as a trenchant portrait of what he calls a "dying social ritual". Indeed, the ironic-parodical-critical approach which had characterized that series (related to social conventions of sexual behavior) had by then already marked, in fact, the way out of the Cuban ghetto. Yet, the formal language - the material, collagistic wealth, the assemblagistic-nature, the multiplicity of personal items, the boxes, the purses, the ornaments, the drawers, the showcases, the flowers, the garments, the sequins, the cheap jewels, the souvenirs, the 'grandmotherly' lace, the gold, the velvet - all these had still been anchored in the earthly, pulpy, soft element of life, and had composed a personal mosaic saturated with childhood memories; a fantasy which had referred to memory mechanisms and to the way in which nostalgia kills memory.

Long before the Cuban discourse became attractive in the New York art market (with all the clichés and expectations for "multi-cultural authenticity" involved), Trasobares had already deconstructed the iconography of the exiled culture. Towards the end of the eighties, when the authentic, multi-cultural wave reached its peak, Trasobares had already been past that stage. He stopped identifying himself as a "Cuban" artist and sought to evade any kind of restricting ethnic demarcation. "Art is a universal language. Any attempt to attribute it to a specific district only makes it problematic and limited... I know what happens to an artist who becomes the 'representative of his/her culture'... I no longer wish to carry around with me, wherever I go, my cultural luggage and ethnic heritage; from now on, I carry around in my suitcase only things I really need."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from a preliminary conversation with the artist.

In a preliminary conversation we held, Trasobares used the image of “fever” when depicting the period he was preoccupied with local themes. The process he has undergone since then seems to him like a syndrome of healing. However, the process of purification from the past, cleansing from the ethnic elements, the shift from a specific discussion of Cuban politics and a strategy of exile to a more general discussion referring to the politics of the art world as an embodiment of power mechanisms, and from there - the shift to the pure shape - all this doesn't happen overnight. These are moves which have required a long line of decisions concerning form and material, essentially involving reduction, cancellation, relinquishment and avoidance. One of the most interesting and symptomatic stages in this process is expressed in the series of drawings presented here, which still embodies both extremes in their loose form: the human element versus the anonymous, design element. The works exhibited here are a small selection taken from a large series (*Furniture in my Head*), which was accumulated between the years 1989-1993, immediately after finishing his public office as director of the Metro-Dade's Art in Public Places. Following a short period of cooling off and abstaining from actual artistic creation (due to the obligation of his public service), there was something therapeutic in this sweeping attack on countless papers, with swift, automatic ink scribbles, Rorschachian in nature. The series as a whole deals with two intertwined and interwoven motifs: a self-portrait and some element of furniture - a chair, a cabinet, or an architectural structure. The portrait is always turbulent, painterly, nearly abstract, rich with adrenaline, blotted and moist, whereas the furniture or the structure, which is transferred to the paper by a Xeroxing technique, is always solid, clean and dry. These two motifs clearly demonstrate the duality underlying Trasobares' (artist/designer) work and personality, thus one may treat the series as a whole as a reference clarifying the current body of sculptural works. In fact, in these drawings the artist has stretched to the limit the possibility of merger between two formal extremes. On the one hand, the expressive, free-hand pole, reminiscent of the Surrealist Automatic Writing and the literary moves preceding Surrealism, which were defined by Mallarmé as processes of "transposition", later known as "stream of consciousness"; and on the other hand, the conceptual, logical, austere pole, anchored in unshakable structural logic. The obsessive preoccupation with the creative, feverish mind, the projection of the self onto paper, this

flooding which blurs anatomic details, all these confront the need to reach accuracy and order.

In their transfiguration as drawings, the chairs are always referents to "culture": collective cultural memories of architectural-design elements which have become with time distinct icons of modernism – Rietveld's chair, the Breuer Chair, the Mackintosh Chair - classical design models, considered archetypes of modernity, which have achieved a status of classics. There are other drawings in which images from classic architecture (the Colosseum) flicker from misty, stormy landscapes. Always contrasting elements: internal landscapes and cultural structures, chaos and order.

The shift from two-dimensional representation of identified chairs to an actual, three-dimensional production of anonymous chairs was a natural course which can be described as a shift from terrains of the public sphere into territories belonging to the spiritual, private sphere of the artist. In a paradoxical manner, a reversed move has occurred: after the spontaneous drawings which had concealed design icons belonging to the public sphere (art history) came the chair sculptures, which despite being the result of an industrial, accurate preliminary planning, and despite the fact that in the course of their production the personal handwriting has been erased completely, and no trace of that flowing and lightness has remained, they still convey personal, almost intimate, feelings.

One of the stages preceding the current chair series - we may call it an intermediary stage in the process of abandonment, since it was still charged with the social-political interest, yet already marked by an actual production of design objects (though still not designed by the artist himself) – produced two key works: *Casting Couch for an American Biennial* (1993) and an installation of chairs - *Museum of American Democratic Art: Tumbling Chairs* (1994). In *Casting Couch*, Trasobares makes an ironic use of the familiar modernist furniture of Mies van der Rohe, while shifting the design meaning to other political-institutional channels and to the goring of power and authority mechanisms within the art world. The question raised was what is defined as "American" in the "American Biennial" and what isn't? And how can one still get into the Biennial (via the curator's bed? or perhaps Freud's couch might help?), and mainly, who decides? – these are questions originating from an

ironic, sarcastic point of view of someone whose identity has been defined by the center, and in any case, has been demarcated under the category of the "other".

In the *Tumbling Chairs* installation made for the Center for the Fine Arts in 1994, Trasobares has stretched the limits of his criticism on the meta-narrative of the art world, aiming his arrows directly at the soft spot of the intra-institutional hierarchy. A stack of eighty Director Chairs, a colorful, pyramid-like construction, was set as a metaphor for the human structure (virtual Table of Organization) constituting well-oiled museum systems. The back supports of the chairs carry the titles designating holders of various positions. The top of the pyramid is occupied by the label DIRECTOR: MUSEUM MARKETING, and underneath one can find, among others, the following positions: CURATOR MAINSTREAM/ CURATOR INSANE ART/ TRUSTEE LATINO POWERHORS LEADER SUBLIMINALIA/ CONSULTANT CONVERGENCE/ CURATOR POLITICAL CORRECTNESS. In the spirit of institutional criticism a-la Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers, Trasobares is cynically unmasking here institutional categorization methods and systems of knowledge, which dictate taste and constitute cultural decisions, raising the question of what happens to values when they are connected to power and authority.

An entirely different role (a metaphor in the psychological direction) is given to the chairs in another work (1995), more introverted, which bears an autobiographical shade (separation?): three pairs of chairs with marble boards or sketch books attached to their backs. Here, the meaning of a chair/pedestal is more conspicuous, and a dialectical relationship is starting to crystallize between the drawing and the texture of the marble, between one chair and another, as a dialogue between two, always two, *I and Thou* (Martin Buber), you and I, together and apart, through mutuality in the system of impressions and pressures one leaves on the other.

This element will receive a more refined and perfected expression in the current exhibition, which, to a large extent, ties up loose ends by speaking an abstract universal language. Dialogue and duality are the key words to the understanding of the works exhibited here. One may call these works "conversation pieces" in the sense that you can feel the dispositions of one against the other, the transmission of messages. The duality is found on nearly every possible level: from the tension between



representation and abstraction, between order and chaos, between rational and irrational, through the fluctuation between close and remote, industrial and intimate, cold (marble) and warm (wood), negative and positive, random and expected, organic and geometric, to the dichotomy of masculine/feminine, nature/culture, matter/spirit. One of the most protruding dualistic elements in these works is the tension between the geometrical and the concrete. Geometry deals with an ideal world of space-less points, lines devoid of thickness and boundless planes; the concrete is units of texture, surfaces and encounters between different surfaces and volumes, organized spaces which assign a place for each and every object.

The choice of two basic materials - marble which is a geological product of millions of years, and wood which is a changing organic material, influenced by environmental conditions such as temperature and moisture – is also charged with dual meaning. Imitative textural qualities can be ascribed to both materials (the eyes of the wood and the cloud-like flesh-like texture of the marble); both are classical materials in the sense of the artistic language, yet each pulls in a different direction: the wood towards organic contexts, toward furniture and design, and the marble towards more austere contexts of architecture, commemoration (public monuments, gravestones) and class hierarchy.

As for the current cultural context, it is hard to locate this sculpture work. Are these works modernistic in nature? Do they preserve the modernistic utopia? Can one at all think nowadays of works of art in light of the Greenbergian reductionism? And if not, how do they deviate from Modernism? What do they have in common with the post-modernism of the end of the millennium? The answers to these questions are not unequivocal, and they leave many loose ends. Placing them within a cultural-historical context may provide some of the answers, and I will attempt to do so through a discussion of the empty chair motif, while examining the diverse influences and possible links.

The chair motif has intensified and strengthened throughout the history of human culture, from the functional aspect as well as from the metaphorical and symbolic contexts attached to it in the course of time. The twentieth century culture, in its reductive skeptical way, has tended to use this motif in its empty state, unmanned. Indeed, the "empty chair" motif is intertwined throughout twentieth

century art. Although it had also been used prior to the modern era (in Vermeer's works, for example), it seems that over the last century the empty chair has acquired an amazing, almost compulsive, presence in most art movements. A quick and non-comprehensive inventory brings to mind Gauguin's chair, as painted by Van Gogh; Magritte's empty, floating chair, the chairs of Francis Bacon, crying out in their loneliness, Giacometti's studio chairs, the overturned chairs of Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg, Lucas Samaras' chairs, and, of course, Andy Warhol's electric chair. One can also add to this inventory list Joseph Beuys' and Anselm Kiefer's chairs, which are unmanned, yet saturated with human temperatures; charged with the echoing memory of their owners. Among contemporary artists one can mention Bruce Nauman, who has cast the space underneath his chair as a disconcerting gesture of negation, and Vito Acconci's awaiting set of seats.

A swift retrospective glance at the variety of empty chairs populating the works of contemporary artists, while focusing on the three dimensional department of art history, reveal that this motif has been incorporated in modern sculpture under a wide range of contexts, which can be grouped around three related axes or moves: the first is linked to undermining the status of the pedestal or the frame (in the case of painting) as a marker separating the world of art from everyday reality. The sculpture's pedestal or base has been replaced by the chair – a trivial object, devoid of aura - in an attempt to undermine the necessity of this radical division (for example, Duchamp's bicycle wheel). The second axis is based on the triviality and neutrality of the chair, being an object in the literal sense, unlike a charged metaphorical object. In this category one may include Donald Judd's tautological approach, asserting that a-chair-as-a-chair-as-a-chair, or Joseph Kosuth's conceptual practice, exhibiting in the gallery space the dictionary definition of "chair", the concrete chair and its photograph. In contrast, the third axis charges the chair with existential meanings in the spirit of the present-absent: like the empty garment, carrying with it memories, feelings and thoughts of the body that had worn it, the empty chair is charged with the absent-presence of its owner, thus acquiring a meaning of traces, a kind of mold of the human body being impressed in it; a negative picture of a blurred identity, an existential condition of the probing self-thrust into space, in the style of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

These three axes exist simultaneously in Trasobares' chair sculptures: the chair as pedestal (as carrier of marble blocks, as shelf); the chair as a "clean", "objective" thing, devoid of local narrative and of any content-oriented-associative charge; and the chair as an existential metaphor (the absence of a human element), whose positioning against other chairs constitutes a mystical environment. The third axis immediately cancels any possibility of a puristic reductive reading a-la Greenberg. According to Greenberg, every metaphor is a mimetic reference to reality. Hence, anything that maintains links with the "world" (outside art) is cast out. Trasobares' sculptures do not obey this autistic definition. This is not the zero point of art, nor the empty stage as a kind of silent theater, nor the bare canvas in painting. Echoes of the Greenbergian approach can be found only at the heart of the cathartic process of formal purification, and in the perception that art develops as a continual process of simplification and self-purification.

Trasobares' chairs/sculptures bring to mind several historical-aesthetic courses: they may relate to "Neo-Plasticism" which had engaged in geometrical relations and contrasts of light, just as they may echo trends in Russian Constructivism which had been preoccupied with the mutual relations between a sculptural form and an architectural structure; likewise, it is convenient to connect them to European Formalism like that of Brancusi, which is based on archetypal, concise and restrained formalism, charged with traditional rituals and myths (Brancusi was the first artist who added a furniture resemblance to the sculptural qualities, and his sculptural-conceptual approach certainly influenced many trends in sculpture of the twentieth century); it is just as easy to anchor them in post-minimalist trends of the last thirty years. However, if the diversity of influences were to be eliminated, one would end up with two clear sources of influence - Donald Judd and Scott Burton - each in his own way had refined an archetype referring to solid, rectangular, grounded furniture, sharing the space with the viewer. On the visual level, there is a distinct formal similarity, at least in the sense that with the three of them, all the furniture-sculptural components always obey some centralizing pattern of an axis, or a center of gravity anchoring them to the ground. Yet, the deeper one takes the comparison, the greater the differences than the points of similarity: Donald Judd's tautological definition of sculpture (a-form-as-a-form), which eliminates any "literary" meaning deviating from the pure language of art, is not relevant in

this case, just as the decorative-functional elements characterizing Scott Burton's furniture-sculptures are alien to his world view.

Despite the apparent points of tangency (a serial-quality, symmetry focused towards a central axis, an abstraction which appropriates certain formal qualities of furniture, an inclination toward horizontality, closeness-to-the-ground, a commitment to the materials), Trasobares' sculpture deviates from the reductionistic-utopistic sculptural logic. From an intricate network of intersections and influences, and after completing a circle of 360 degrees from the private sphere to the public-social sphere and back to the private sphere, he achieves, at last, reconciliation and harmony, from a far less ideal or romantic position. He has refined the sculptural language into a metaphorical designation of links between subjects, a diagram notation of relationships and views between human beings, an outlining of positions and mutual relations, links of *I and Thou*. One may describe the debate between private and public, or the extent to which art is committed to reality as the essence of modernist and post-modernist views. It is hard to determine which of the two is a mirror reflection in this case. Are these the fragments of modernism reflected in the mirror fragments as a reflection of a reality devoid of ideology? Or, perhaps, a reflection of a new, non-dogmatic, belief in simple human love between me and you.

*Miami, February 1996*

**Translated by Daria Kassovsky**