

Talking about Angels with Demian Schopf

An interview with Elena Agudio, January 2009

Elena Agudio: Symbols are the highest and most evocative distillation of the culture of images. Layers of significance, webs of meanings, they can speak secret languages and pass silently through history, though their nuance only grows over time. Ambiguity is their power, and the ambiguity of their interpretation is the key to reading them. Demian, your harquebusier angels are symbolic images, icons of the contamination between colonial culture and the indigenous tradition, religious and revolutionary iconography, the Baroque language and contemporary media. How important is it for you to work with memory and archetypes of Latin American culture? And what do you feel Latin America is? Is it just an abstract geographical concept or a cultural reality?

Demian Schopf: That is a very difficult question to answer. I believe that on this continent, on the one hand you can find general features of “Latin Americanism” and general features of “Catholicism,” which may also be found in Spain and perhaps in the Philippines, as well. And then on the other hand, you have the general features of what is “mestizo” and “indigenous.” You also have places with a significant African influence, and others with almost none at all, like Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina. During the nineteenth century there were substantial migrations from Asia and Europe to Latin America (the Chinese in Peru; the Japanese in Brazil; the Italians in Argentina; the Germans in Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil, etc.). There has also been significant internal migration (Peruvians in Chile and Argentina; Colombians in Venezuela; Bolivians and Paraguayans in Argentina; and so on.). Despite these general features I don’t think we can speak of “Latin America” as a unit nor celebrate this continent as the new Babylon—just as we cannot speak, either, of “the European,” “the African,” “the Asian,” or “the Polynesian.” Paris, London and Berlin are also similar to Babylon—not to mention New York or Los Angeles. Migration has been a constant all throughout world history and it has certainly accelerated during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Specifically with regard to the imprecision of the concept of Latin America as a homogeneous cultural unity, I’d like to offer one example: the Baroque art produced by Franciscan and Jesuit missions in modern-day Paraguay. During the Paraguayan Baroque, a curious phenomenon occurred. I owe my knowledge of this to Ticio Escobar, the current Paraguayan Cultural Minister. He explained to me that when the Franciscan and Jesuit missions started functioning in Paraguay, Guaraní art had long

been characterized by a strong vein of geometric simplification, so a Baroque style emerged that was infected by these elements that were, in fact, almost antithetical to it. The result was a cross between the Baroque “pearl” and the Guaraní “geometry.”

The symbol of the angel, on the other hand, has been found in Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Israel and Rome, and if you force things a bit (as the Church did) in Pre-Columbian America: on the “Gate of the Sun” in Tiawanaku, in the petroglyphs of the Paracas culture, in the Amazonian shamans, in the Quechua Viracocha and Quetzalcoatl, the “Feathered Serpent” in Mesoamerica (which, moreover, recalls the Chinese dragons...).

I think the common pattern here, then, is the combination of something “Pre-Columbian” (or African) with the Spanish Baroque, which is very different from the German or Italian Baroque. History is a sum of layers, of veils...I cannot describe them all. I will focus on the painted apocryphal Angels and Archangels of Cuzco and on my rather more modest work. I proceed in a very typically literary method (since archangelic painting is extremely literary). And I do something similar to what the missionaries did: I transcode. They turned Viracocha into the Archangel St. Michael commanding a celestial army. This was a silent revolution. Transcoding means using a change of code to change the meaning of something. This can be a gathering of different codes, interweaved in one piece, and it is possible to displace this concept from the literary to the visual field. To substitute the original harquebus with a sign that mixes a camouflage fabric, a pitchfork and a scythe painted in red or a cross held as a sword with a pitchfork inserted in its bottom, or an M-16 or a sport fishing harpoon—this is transcoding. Other signs that are inserted in the scenes are the dummy mask of the Archangel; the surrounding setting that frames the scene with the scabby dissected animals in a decaying museum; and the appropriation of the photographic rhetoric that replaces the pictorial materiality of the cited work. Your question is very apt, because it implicitly accuses me of being a post-modern Mannerist. At the bottom of it all, much of this work is about the Cold War—but it is also about the androgynous factor that links angels and plastic surgery, and it questions dichotomies like man/woman, or child/adult. The angels feature the monstrous face of Michael Jackson (or Orlan, if you prefer). They are about something that infiltrates culture without announcing itself in the manner of the great revolutions or narratives—or of “something” that is always already infiltrated in a great narrative—a poisonous vapor of uncertainty—such as the Evangelization and the

Conquest of America, the Cuban Revolution, Liberation Theology, the Socialist Project or the fight against Communism. Thus, it is a silent revolution: a kind of sick brother of those types of historical discourses.

EA: The series of installations photographed by Demian Schopf in *La Revolución Silenciosa* (Silent Revolution) are full of literary wisdom. The angels are representations of characters from the apocryphal Book of Enoch, a text discovered in Abyssinia at the end of the eighteenth century, written in Ge’ez language but translated from an original text written in Aramaic between the third and first century BC. It came to be a sacred text for Coptic Christianity but was declared apocryphal by Jewish culture and the Catholic Church. I know your father is a university professor of literature. Did his library have an impact on your imagination and your creative world? Is erudition important to your work?

DS: The influence of the Book of Enoch is an open debate in Andean Angelology. The Book of Enoch, disseminated in America by the reading of Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), recognized seventeen other names related to meteorological and astrological phenomena in addition to the seven archangels associated with the throne of heaven. We should not forget that the Councils of Trent and Aachen determined that the only legitimate archangels to be painted were the ones mentioned in the Bible: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. The Orthodox Church added the archangel Uriel. For Bolivian historians José de Mesa and Teresa Gisbert, however, the Book of Enoch is the basis for Andean Angelology. However, the Peruvian historian and anthropologist Ramón Mujica Pinilla disagrees. His argument is supported by the strong constraints that the Inquisition exercised in Lima against any unorthodox or Judaizing tendency. “The Tridentine Catholic Church,” he says, “developed an Angelology that could combat unorthodox Angelologies as well as absorb or reinterpret some aspects of rival Angelologies” (Mujica Pinilla, Ramon, *Angeles apócrifos en la América Virreinal* (Apocryphal Angels in Colonial America), p. 36). Nevertheless, we do know that the Spanish Crown encouraged the cult of the seven Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Jerudiel (or Jeudiel) Sealchiel (or Sealthiel) and Barachiel. In 1516 Charles V ordered the construction of the church of Santa Ana in Palermo, which by then was under the regime of the Habsburgs. There is a fresco that portrays the seven archangels around the throne of God, painted by the Madrid born artist Bartolomé Román (1596 -1659).

This leads to the following enigma: if one of the most common questions raised by the Colonial painting of

archangels and angels is in regard to the apocryphal nature of their names, why aren’t they limited to the seven angels of Palermo or, if not, to the twenty-four names found in the Book of Enoch? One answer is that the indigenous and “mestizo” painters were not fluent in Hebrew or Latin (and sometimes not even Spanish), and could have written the names wrong, thus multiplying the angelic pantheon. I, however, am not satisfied with this answer, except in specific cases.

Regarding the influence of my parents, they are both literature professors, yes, and I always had a good library at my disposal. I imagine that by osmosis this may have influenced me as well as my siblings. Regarding the relationship between “theory” and “art,” for me it is not something complementary, a bureaucratic step or a simple procedure to fit into a certain post-Conceptual art system (or market). It is a real need. I am currently working on a doctoral dissertation in philosophy with a concentration in aesthetics and theory of art.

EA: The fourth book (ca. 83 - 90) of the apocryphal text is the “Book of Dreams,” in which Enoch describes his allegorical dream to Methuselah. Four white men—archangels—come down to Earth, tie up the stars and throw them down the abyss. Elephants, camels and donkeys fight among themselves. A white ox—Noah—builds an Ark and the story continues until the return of the Messiah. This poetic tale, imbued with Surrealism, is called the “Apocalypse of the Animals.” Did this tale inspire you to create these images so filled with animals and so redolent of apocalypse?

DS: The role of animals in Catholic and Jewish iconography is well known. It is difficult for me here to expand on all the ways in which animals have been used. I will focus on the Colonial-era painting of apocryphal angels and archangels and the way in which I have tried to reinterpret some of these symbols. In some cases, they were used to represent mortal sins. For example, the pig—and occasionally the wild boar or the tapir—represents gluttony, and the peacock represents pride. There is, in this case, an additional element: in Latin America, and in my photographs, you will find animals that do not exist on other continents. Because of this, the Spanish had to “translate” them into the Catholic mythology. This was the case, for example, with such camelids as llama, vicuña, guanaco and alpaca, which were simply translated as “camels.” When depicting the expulsion of the Moors from Spain, the artist painted them with indigenous features and riding llamas—there is a magnificent painting of this iconography, in fact, in the Cuzco Cathedral. Every dead llama is a symbol of the defeat of Islam—as well as a symbol of the defeat and conversion of the Incas.

In Peru, we find something even more radical: Santiago Matamoros,¹the Spanish symbol of the fight against Islam, who is also frequently represented as Santiago Mataindios.² Another case is the Puma, translated as *león*, or lion, a denomination still common in the Chilean countryside. Furthermore, in Pre-Columbian languages like Mapudungún we still do not know whether the Mapuche word *nahuel* means lion, tiger or puma. Something similar occurs in the Amazon with the jaguar and the tiger. As we know, the lion (or tiger), for example, is associated with Saint Mark, the snake with Lucifer, the fish with Saint Raphael, and the big fish with Leviathan, etc. I’d like to reserve a special place for the motif of the ape or monkey. What I am about to say about monkeys I learned from my friend Constanza Acuña, PhD in art history from the University of Bologna. In medieval bestiaries the monkey was always associated with evil and the figure of the devil, and depictions always underscored its disrespectful, frivolous character. And yet Teresa Gisbert, who has been extensively quoted in this interview, explained that for the Pre–Columbian Chimú culture in Peru, the monkey was apparently considered a “sustaining god,” a sort of “Chimú Atlas.” Gisbert, in her book *Iconography and myths of Indigenous Art*, quotes the observations of a Jesuit missionary named Arriagada, who in his *Extirpation of idolatry* (1621) describes the motif of the monkey in response to “what Avila and Cuevas saw in Huarochiri:” “In the windows of the church we came across two wooden monkeys, and suspecting what they were, we found out that they were revered, and they were placed there to uphold the building. There was quite a long history about them.” As Acuña says: “For Gisbert, this story would explain in part why this motif of monkey columns survived in the Andean region until the eighteenth century. This is evident, for example, in the column of the choir of the Church of Santa Cruz de Juli, where one may observe a monkey at the base of the pillar.

EA: Demian Schopf’s works are refined reflections on the history of colonization through evangelization in Latin America, and the silent resistance of the local indigenous culture. The iconography of apocryphal angels with weapons is a topic that the Andean painting of the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries received from European painting brought to the New World. It was forgotten in modern Europe (if we take the starting point of the modern age to be the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, despite the existence until

1 T.N. Translated as Saint James the Moor-slayer (also known as “San Tiago de Matamoros”) is a famous Spanish mythological figure who helped the Christians defeat the Muslims in battle.

2 T.N. Translated as Saint James the Indian-slayer

well into the nineteenth century of traces of typically Catholic Baroque backwardness in countries such as Spain, Portugal, Italy and even in certain remote parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the Slavic Catholic world. The harquebusier archangel appeared in Andean painting thanks to the clergy and their efforts to evangelize the Indians by replacing some of the symbols of Pre-Columbian “mythologies” of elements like lightning (Illapa), the sun (Inti), the moon (One), snow and other natural phenomena found in the high plateaus and mountains. The Book of Enoch speaks of angels known for controlling these phenomena. But couldn’t the royal army dressed in seventeenth century costumes (reminiscent of Van Dyck) be understood as an expression of a revolution that made these painters paint pictures that had no meaning for them? Could this not be understood as sarcasm directed at the evangelizers, “anghelloi,” who in the name of God brought a message of peace and faith that they were only able to deliver through weapons and violence?

DS: That is an excellent question. Symbolic religious art was conceived from the outset as a rhetorical device of persuasion through visual imagery, aimed at an indigenous population that was mostly illiterate and in many cases not even Spanish speaking. This allows us to understand, for example, the importance of the façade in the ideological role of architecture. Hence, “the ornament anticipates the iconography of the altarpiece” (De Mesa and Gisbert). These façades are sometimes true outdoor altars. It is a Baroque that is seemingly ornamental but also definitely more allegorical, literary and narrative than structural (in the sense of a formal experiment that dialogues with Renaissance and Mannerist Art). And so there is no Latin American Borromini—or Parmigianino, Bronzino, or Michelangelo, for that matter. It would be impossible. In the Latin American Baroque there is no formal canon to be critically discussed, simply because there is no prior tradition deemed worthy of being discussed. The Spanish Empire is perhaps the most radical example of the foundation of a world upon the rubble of another world that has been destroyed and that nonetheless survives its own Apocalypse through this “Baroque.” The conquerors’ primary goal was to crush all vestiges of other religions and civilizations: Mexico City was built on top of Tenochtitlán, modern-day Cuenca on the Incan Tomebamba and colonial Cuzco on top of indigenous Cuzco. The beginning of the history of Latin American painting is part of an ideological program of eradication and religious refoundation, not of formal experiments in dialogue with previous traditions, since previous traditions were formally crushed. Nor do we find in Baroque Latin American architecture the subtle game of shapes and countershapes found in

European Baroque architecture, in which the nave is supported by a row of columns, usually in the form of an oval or ellipse, to draw worshippers’ attention to the words being preached from behind the altar. Simply, there weren’t any “artists” in the “modern” sense of the term. What we find is “craftsmen” at the service of the clergy, much like in the European Middle Ages. On the other hand, in Latin America there was never the need (or the will, or the ability) to dispense of the usual two straight lines that divide the nave into three interior spaces. Basically, the cross structure inherited from Gothic architecture remained in use, but with a façade that had very little Gothic to it. We must not forget, however, that the Pre-Columbian hieroglyphics, bas-relief and iconography also found their way into these façades with the permission of the clergy. After finding it impossible to do away entirely with the Pre-Columbian influence and start from their desired *tabula rasa*, the clergy had no choice but to integrate the indigenous pantheon into the Catholic—with some asymmetry of status, of course, to make it clear that the Pre-Columbian gods were nothing more than heretical “representations” of the true religion and the only God. Your remark about Illapa is well taken: the archangel — perhaps Saint Michael / Viracocha himself— holds his harquebus because Illapa has the power to produce rain, not because he wants to shoot God or Inti, but because it is only God, through him, who can provide rain. This representation functions —could function— as an argument against any shamanic ceremony or magical-animistic thinking. By consequence, it is neither a thunderbolt nor a shaman that may decide about the rain, only God himself through one of His angels, who are nothing more than His instruments. On this specific point we could agree with De Mesa and Gisbert, because the Book of Enoch is the only source that explicitly links angels and meteorological phenomena. Moreover, the name of the Archangel is “Asiel timor Dei,” which clearly reminds us of “Asael” from the Book of Enoch. On the other hand, Mujica Pinilla could argue that such a link proceeds exclusively and exclusionarily from the Quechua religion and that it was adapted to Spanish Catholicism, even though this does not explain the unusual coincidence of Asiel / Asael. I do not know what the right answer is —if there even is one— nor do I know how we might ever learn it. Perhaps Mujica and De Mesa and Gisbert are both right. In any event, I don’t think their hypotheses have to be mutually exclusive. For better or for worse, if the Inquisition of Lima wanted to “avoid” something, that “something” must have existed, or could have existed, at least as a possibility.

There is another important fact here: when the Spanish arrived at Cuzco with their harquebuses, the Quechua thought they had come out of Illapa himself (they also thought that an armed man atop his horse was a single creature with two heads, four legs, a hairy face and a partially metallic body). No movie about an alien invasion could come close to envisioning or depicting what this encounter must have been like for the indigenous people. The word *Illapa* was used to signify “harquebus,” “thunder” and “lightning” at the same time. In this way, the Spanish carried the lightning.

I do not believe, however, that the Colonial-era painting of apocryphal angels and archangels is a parody of the violence of evangelization, which indeed was very violent. There are other documents that explicitly denounce it, such as the *Primera Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* by the indigenous Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, or the writings of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.

EA: The “mestizo” style of the Andean Baroque is a clear example of linguistic contamination, full of political and ideological implications. Chile has also experienced historical moments, rather recently, in which freedoms were suppressed. How much and up to what point can art be political? Alfredo Jaar, in a recent exhibition at the Spazio Oberdan in Milan, posed this question. What do you think?

DS: This question is complex. I don’t know to what extent art can be political. For someone like Hegel, for example, its political and ideological function ends with religious art, which would make Latin American Baroque art politically necessary, and certainly an “evangelizing Catholic art”—in other words, a dogmatic and political art with a very clear purpose: to Christianize the indians. Regarding “art as denunciation,” the effectiveness of a work of art can only be measured by the social impact it generates.

My modest opinion is that the political factor is something that is present in many human and social endeavors, not only in art. To be a citizen, an employer, an employee —and yes, an artist, too— is to exercise a political “being.” Pinochet’s dictatorship is certainly a very common topic in Chilean art (curiously, it is more common among Chilean artists living abroad than among Chilean artists living here). Also curious is that this topic became more visible when Pinochet left the presidency (during the dictatorship activism could lead to imprisonment, torture, exile, death and disappearance). Thus, Chilean “political art” began to be visible mainly in the so-called transition to democracy, after 1990. During the 1980s there

was an important art movement producing proto-conceptual works that were so difficult to interpret that the authorities at the time never even noticed them or realized their hidden subversive messages—at least, to the best of my knowledge, none of these artists was ever imprisoned or censored. However, despite this contradiction, this movement, known as the *Escena de Avanzada*, is possibly one of the most important formal modernizations in the history of Chilean art. My generation owes a great deal to the *Escena de Avanzada*. This sense of obligation with regard to what “political art” (as it is often dubiously labeled) “ought to be” is something of a relic of what we inherited from the academic art schools of the *Escena de Avanzada* in the post-dictatorship period. I was trained in one of these schools and, of course, I must acknowledge receipt of that sense of what political art “ought to be,” with all its attendant idiosyncrasies. As I did at the beginning of this interview I will refer to one example, which is related to the title of the series, *La revolución silenciosa* (The Silent Revolution). I spoke earlier of transcoding. Well, the first instance of transcoding was to call this set of operations a “silent revolution.” This inevitably points our attention to the appropriation of a reference that is as undesirable as it is necessary. There is a book entitled *Chile: Revolución Silenciosa* (Chile: Silent Revolution). Its author is Joaquín Lavín, a disciple of the economist Milton Friedman of the Chicago School that, as many people know, had a decisive influence on the economic policies of the Pinochet government. Joaquín Lavín’s “silent revolution” is essentially a justification for the institutional reforms undertaken by the military dictatorship. I chose this title not because I wanted to parody or undermine Lavín’s analysis: the genesis (in chronological terms) of this title arose from the need to replace the archangelic weapons with other objects and to contextualize this operation in a broader and less contingent field of meanings. The following paradox explains the use of an object that replaces the harquebus, the most obscenely categorical and explicit reference: in Chile the political forces that gained power through a revolutionary act were not the political forces that traditionally use revolutionary rhetoric: it was, in fact, a group of reactionary forces that caused a revolution through a coup d’état—one that was not at all silent. Lavín’s analysis does not make mention of the genuinely repressive methods that made the so-called Silent Revolution possible: the systematic use of terror, disappearance, and torture; the dismantling of the State, public education, and the civic space in general; and the imposition of new institutions through electoral fraud. Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian calls it, in contrast, a “right-wing capitalist revolution.” Looking beyond Lavín’s vulgar rhetorical fraud, I prefer

to focus on other possible ways to bring meaning to this veritable oxymoron that seeks to capitalize, through an advertising formula, on the forward-thinking nature of revolution with the discretion of silence.

I think scythes and pitchforks painted in red are signs that are associated with certain ideologies. Yet they find a surface for inscription in Latin America that is different from that of their places of origin (and of their history of art). This is what the Lavinian euphemism of “silent revolution” blatantly seeks to channel in such a twisted way. Combining these signs with others (such as camouflage fabric or the Catholic cross) places them in a context in which they function in relation to the things they have been arranged with. In turn, this hybridization is also an operation of transcoding in that it replaces the harquebus, in one case, or the sword of the Archangel Michael, in another, with a cross that ends in a red pitchfork. Following the same argument, but in a second sense, there are other meanings to be gleaned from the formula of the Silent Revolution, beyond the Chilean paradox and the delayed modernity of Latin America. Silent Revolution can also be understood as an apologetic moniker for the many processes of colonization and cultural transfer, among them, for example, the Colonial painting of apocryphal angels and archangels. A specific symptom of these processes is the way in which names and their virtues are inadvertently misspelled—this is what Ramon Mujica Pinilla supposes, and I think we should at least admit the possibility that in some cases it happened. This, nevertheless, does not exclude the possibility that the Book of Enoch has been used in Upper Peru as De Mesa and Gisbert think. In both cases, these errors occurred slowly, beyond any kind of “intentional consciousness.” It is a collective phenomenon that occurs silently, without any idea or project of subjectivity, like the accidental lack or surplus of names and virtues. To put the term “silent revolution” before the apocryphal titles and names, sometimes poorly written, is to work with naming, and to transcode in a literary sense. This is to say that history and the future unfold in fits and starts, in ways that are uneven, slow, unnoticed, inaudible.