Galleria Giampaolo Abbondio

María Magdalena Campos-Pons | Press

María Magdalena Campos-Pons' work is largely defined by an investigation of her identity, particularly her Cuban and African heritage. The issue of memory plays a vital role throughout the artist's installations, photographs and drawings, and reflects the feeling of displacement that Campos-Pons experiences as a Cuban expatriate. She constantly tests the boundaries of artistic practice, never allowing herself to be defi ned by any single medium. Exile motivates her examination of the problematic of belonging, assimilation, and trans-culturation between diverse cultures.
Feminist issues and especially the concept of gender specific roles are present in her works. Campos-Pons generally seeks not to defi ne identity and thereby limit it. She wants to discover aspects of it, thereby unraveling questions about her own existence, always leaving her own windows of opportunity open.

Artist Bio

María Magdalena Campos-Pons (Matanzas, Cuba, 1959) is a Cuban-born artist who has lived in the United States for many years, dividing her time between Cuba, Boston (MA), and Nashville (TN). After studying at the Higher Institute of Art in Havana and the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, where she focused on Painting and Media Arts, Campos-Pons embarked on a prolific career as a multimedia artist and performer. She has exhibited extensively in solo and group shows around the world, participating in major biennials and international art events, and receiving numerous prestigious awards and honors, such as the 2026 Art Basel Awards.
In addition to her artistic practice, Campos-Pons has held teaching positions at several esteemed institutions in both Cuba and the United States. In 2017, she was appointed to the Cornelius Vanderbilt Endowed Chair of Fine Arts at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where she currently teaches.
Among her numerous international appearances across the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, she took part in two editions of the Venice Biennale: the first time in 2013, at the 55th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, where she presented the multimedia project "53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year", curated in collaboration with Neil Leonard; the second time in 2026, at the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, with the artwork «Anatomy of the Magnolia Tree for Koyo Kouoh and Toni Morrison».
Campos-Pons' work is held in numerous major public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which reaffirmed its support through a new acquisition in October 2022, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Canada, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, and the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. The Ludwig Museum notably acquired her installation Bar Matanzas Sound Map, which was presented during documenta14 in Athens and Kassel in 2017. In 2026, she was also selected among the artists commissioned for the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago.

Awards

Campos-Pons has received many awards and recognitions, including the “Mention of Honor”, in 1986 in the XVIIIème Festival International de la Peinture, Château Musée, Cagnes Sur Mer, France.
In 1990 Painting Fellowship, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada, in 1992 Foreign Visiting Artist Grant, Media Arts, Canada Council, Canada, in 1994 Bunting Fellowship. Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, Radcliffe Research and Study Center, Cambridge, MA and in 1995 Art Reach 95 Award, Natio- nal Congress of Art & Design, Salt Lake City, Utah.
In October 2017 she received the endowed Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair at Vanderbilt University in Nashvil- le, Tennessee.
In 2026 was announced as medalist at the 2026 Art Basel Awards

Awards and Residences

2016 Teaching Excellence Award
2016 Rauschenberg Residency Award
2016 Montalvo Residency Award
2012 Woman of Color Award Boston MA US
2011 Woman of Courage Boston MA US
2011 Hispanic Alianza Award Nashville TN US
2009 The Jorge Hernandez Leadership in the Arts Award, MA US
2007 Rappaport Prize
2002 LEF Foundation, Cambridge MA
1997 The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, NY US
1995 Art Reach 95 Award, National Congress of Art & Design, Salt Lake City, UT US
1995 Bunting Fellowship, Radcliffe College at Harvard, Cambridge, MA US
1995 New England Foundation for the Arts, Regional Fellowship, MA US
1992-1991 Foreign Visiting Artist Grant, Media Arts, Canada Council Painting
1992-1991 Fellowship, The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada
1990 Painting Fellowship, The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada
1989 Medal of Honor, City of Guanabacoa, Cuba
1985 Symposium of Scientifi c Studies, Research Award, Higher Institute of Art, Havana, Cuba

IL GIORNALE DELL'ARTE

61. BIENNALE ARTE DI VENEZIA

La Biennale al femminile in tonalità minori (ma non troppo)

«In Minor Keys» di Koyo Kouoh dà voce a 111 artisti, tra cui sono le donne ad avere una rappresentanza rilevante, che esprimono con diversi media tematiche che vanno dalla rappresentazione del corpo, la memoria, la onnipresente diaspora alle pratiche di resistenza che ridefiniscono il contemporaneo

Monica Trigona | 05 maggio 2026 | 8' min di lettura

BIENNALE ARTE DI VENEZIA 2026

"Uno dei momenti più monumentali e simbolicamente più intensi è rappresentato da «Anatomy of the Magnolia Tree for Koyo Kouoh and Toni Morrison» di Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, che mette in dialogo Kouoh con il premio nobel per la letteratura, prima donna di colore a riceverlo, Toni Morrison. Qui la nozione di minore viene ribaltata: attraverso un cambio di scala, ciò che era marginale diventa centrale, visibile, dominante."

exibart

Biennale Arte 2026: le minor keys diventano storie di resistenza raccontate a voce alta

06
MAGGIO 2026

ARTE CONTEMPORANEA
di **Giulia Ronchi**

In un clima di proteste e manifestazioni si apre la 61. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Biennale di Venezia dal titolo In Minor Keys, della compianta Koyo Kouoh. Una mostra che mantiene le sue promesse curatoriali, con picchi di qualità negli spazi dell'Arsenale

"Nella sala centrale troviamo il primo omaggio a Koyo Kouoh, che viene ritratta in un acquerello monumentale da Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons a fianco al premio Nobel per la letteratura Toni Morrison, celebrazione di due donne nere che hanno guadagnato per prime importanti riconoscimenti internazionali. In alto, nell'angolo, una cassa emette suoni delicati, quasi totalmente sovrastati dal vociare vivace del pubblico della preview."

Ph. Jacopo Salvi

Biennale Arte 2026
María Magdalena Campos-Pons & Kamaal Malak

27 June 2026

Click here to watch the interview

Quantum Potential Vanderbilt University podcast

SEASON 2, EPISODE 8:

Reimagining the creative process with artists and life partners María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Kamaal Malak.

Click here to listen to the podcast

When a highly esteemed painter, sculptor and performance artist collaborates in work and life with an award-winning musician, music producer and researcher, the end result is a completely reimagined and beautiful creative process. In this episode of the Quantum Potential podcast, hear from two extraordinary artists and collaborators, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, MacArthur Fellow and Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair of Fine Arts, and her creative partner and husband, Kamaal Malak, artist-in-residence of culture, advocacy and leadership and a founding member of the award–winning group Arrested Development. They share about their work showcased at the Venice Biennale—one of the world's premier international art exhibitions—where they also served as artistic directors and curators of Vanderbilt University's inaugural presentation.

Conversations | María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Art Basel Awards
Art Basel in Basel 2026

June 18, 2026

Click here to watch to the interview

María Magdalena Campos-Pons, artist, Nashville
Azu Nwagbogu, curator, Founder and Director, African Artists' Foundation, Lagos

In this new series of talks, 'One-on-ones', artists and creatives shortlisted for the Art Basel Awards are invited to the Conversations stage for a dynamic deep dive into their work, recent projects, and journeys to this point.

Multidisciplinary Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons – a key figure of post-revolutionary Cuba and a nominee in the Established Artist category – speaks to AzuNwagbogu, the founder and director of the African Artists' Foundation and LagosPhoto, and the publisher of Art Base Africa, who is nominated in the Curator category.

It Starts with a Question

María Magdalena Campos-Pons interviewed by Crystal Williams

Click here to watch to the interview

Multidisciplinary artist, 2025 Honorary Degree recipient, and MacArthur “genius grant” awardee María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s work is deeply autobiographical. She explores notions of history, memory, gender, and religion and how each informs who we are. In the latest episode of “It Starts with a Question,” she and President Crystal Williams have a wide ranging discussion about the role of art and artists in the world.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM | MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS-PONS: BEHOLD

María Magdalena Campos-Pons

Brooklyn Museum
September 15, 2023–January 14, 2024

María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold is a monographic exhibition of a visionary voice in photography, immersive installation, painting, and performance. Spanning nearly four decades of visually engaging artworks, the exhibition explores Campos-Pons's prescient and sensorial work transporting viewers across geographies, mediums, and spiritual practices. In her explorations of migration, diaspora, and memory, Campos-Pons draws from her family story to examine the global histories of enslavement, indentured labor, motherhood, and migration.
The first multimedia survey of the artist's work since 2007, Behold highlights the artist's dedication to creating new modes of understanding, as well as her engagement with interconnected historical and present-day challenges. These themes are examined through Campos-Pons's performance-based practice and centering of Yoruba-derived Santería symbolism, as well as her work with communities in Boston, Cuba, Italy, and Nashville (her current residence).

EXTREME WEATHER
CLIMA EXTREMO

PICTURING LABOR
RETRATANDO EL TRABAJO

DOCUMENTA 14 | MATANZAS SOUND MAP

María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Neil Leonard

Documenta 14
Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA)
Nikos Kessanlis Exhibition Hall
April 6th - July 16th, 2017

Matanzas Sound Map is a mixed media installation that explores the sonic landscape of Matanzas, from the harbor neighborhoods where iconic musical forms were born to remote estuaries where one imagi- nes Cuba as it sounded before human intervention. The installation creates an aural cartography made in collaboration with sugar growers, musicians, musicologists and scientists.

10-channel of audio diffusion, projected video, cast glass, blown glass, handmade paper, coconut tree bark, coconuts shells, stone.

RESEARCH AND AUDIO SOURCES
All sounds were recorded by Leonard with the participants knowing that they were being recorded for this installation. The sound is presented in two asynchronous loops in two spaces. In the main gallery, sound is presented in three vignettes, each including sounds of nature, human voice and saxophone. Primary sounds include ocean, wetlands, folkloric musicians, street criers, a bar tender and a domino game. The reoccurring saxophone passages serve to suggest a slow breathing rhythm while one enters the piece.

The sounds were recorded over several trips to Matanzas, a province that Leonard has recorded since 1986. The research for this project enabled Leonard to return to Matanzas repeatedly over a one-year period and listen to new musicians, ambient sites and extend the conversation with Cubans about sound in the province. He recorded using mono, stereo, multi-track and Ambisonic (360-degree recording) technologies. The resulting 10-channel sound piece that incorporates an array of multichannel diffusion approaches.

Leonard set up a make shift recording studio in the local theater Cine Atena. He invited leading folkloric singer Raphael Navarro to collaborate in the production, organizing musicians, selecting repertoire and leading the ensemble. Other recordings of musicians playing Afrocuban sacred music were made in living rooms in the sugar producing regions of Limonar and Manguito. Environmental fi eld recordings were made in collaboration with biologist Nelvis Gómez-Campos.

SONIC CARTOGRAPHY
The sound cycles between three elements: environmental sounds, song/speech and ethereal electronic sound, all of which can overlap at times.

Environmental sound include fi eld recordings made in Ciénega Zapata, a 4162 square km biosphere where insects and birds seem to own the land and sing a collective song of the Americas. Songs and

chants are sung by a group organized by iconic rumba singer Raphael Navarro and members of Los Muñequitos de Matanazas. Urban voices were recorded around Calle Medio, the main boulevard in the city of Matanzas, where one hears the cathartic thunder clap of dominos as residents passionately compete on Sunday morning and the theatrical sound of street criers canvasing the town before global business arrives from abroad to organize all advertising in alignment with foreign marketing campaigns. Electronic sounds were created by Leonard playing and processing the saxophone in Robert Rauschenberg's studio in Captiva, Florida. The acoustics his 80"x40" space did much to determine the breathing and pacing of the piece and embody the immensity, quiet and creative power Leonard felt working in Matanzas.

ACOUSTICAL NAVIGATION IN THE SPACE
Eight speakers are distributed throughout the main gallery surrounding the sculptures. Speakers are installed at ear-level. Two speakers are installed at the base of the stairway leading into the gallery. Within these spaces one hears an antiphony of Ambisonic, quadraphonic, stereo and mono diffusion.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Neil leonard
Matanzas Sound Map, 2017
Sound and sculptural installation made in collaboration wirh Rafael Navarro (voice), Caridad Diez (musicologist), Nelvis Gomez-Campos (biologist)
Documenta 14, Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA), Athens, April 8th - September 17th, 2017; Tate Tanks, Tate Modern, London. 02 2025

55TH VENICE BIENNALE | 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year

A multimedia video/sound sculptural installation

María Magdalena Campos-Pons
Neil Leonard

55th Venice Biennale, Cuban Pavilion
Museum of Archelogy, Piazza de San Marco, Venice
May 28 - Nov 24, 2013

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year is our response to the central theme of the 55th Venice Biennale: The Encyclopedic Palace. We chose an idea that refers to a sequence of numbers that have meaning in our personal and collective history, and communicates an awareness of the polarities and richness revea- led by our shared and contrasted identities as female/male, black/white, Cuban/American.

This represents a historic opportunity to represent Cuban culture at the 55th Venice Biennale. Neil and I have produced installation artworks over the last 20 years that champion cultural understanding, tolerance for differences and a cosmopolitan dialogue as a bridge for better interactions among people. It is a gesture of historical importance that we have been invited as ambassadors of Cuban art at this prestigious forum, and to exhibit in the company of Cuban artists from both the island as well as the Diaspora.
This invitation is the result of a triumph of ideas that resonate deeply in our collaborations and individual art practice. We believe in the role of artist and art as an agent of change, embracing societal transformation and poetical/political leadership to create an eloquent future. Neil and I are protagonists in a generation that opened up real dialogue between Cuba and the United States, which is a clear statement of a new era of shared dreams and a restoration of goodwill between nations by the power of love and art; in essence, our collaboration as makers celebrates the pinnacle of our shared humanity - people to people, reaching for support, tolerance and understanding.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year is a multimedia installation about home, migration, the necessity of finding and redefining the meaning of permanency and locality; a reflection in the accumulation of knowledge, both academic and vernacular, coupled with the raw beauty of street intelligence, the en- trapments of the search for information, and the contrast of that which is forbidden and that which is imposed. The role of migration and the restless quest for freedom - intellectual, individual and communal - are intermingled domains that sustain each other. These fundamental issues have generated as well as overturned great individuals, nations and empires.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year utilizes symbols idiosyncratic to Cuban culture and correlated with idioms centered within the western canon, and talk back to power and the concomitant structure of Eurocentric male dominance. The artwork proposes an homage to the countless lives lost and the daily rituals of survival and empowerment in he pursuit of freedom, all while in the search for selfhood. It

conveys the ritualistic gesture of counting and keeping close track of a time that passes and the one to come, that quotidian minutiae of the precious experience of being alive; the invisibility of hidden dreams. The installation is a construct of architecture and sound, old and new always in motion - so typical of Cuban cities but also inherently global. The piece evolved from the installation Llegoo FeFa - premiered at 11th Havana Biennial (see review, Art Forum, November 2012) - and reclaims small fragments of time and life within a grid where time collapses and narratives juxtapose.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year is centered in a massive structure of birdcages. Birdcages were used by emperors and common men to capture beauty and to dream of freedom.
From Yoruba deities, to Leonardo da Vinci, to space travel today, men and women have always dreamed of fl ight as embodying a lightness of being that only a bird could attain.

Birdcages are the architecture of restricted freedom. We are intrigued by their immateriality and transpa- rency, in contrast to the permanency of its architectonic core. The artwork employs these elements as metaphorical vessels to capture imaginary and real dreams.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year builds on an accumulation of factual data and video and additionally explores the buoyant sounds of life as a key element of communication by both birds and people. Sound evades physical entrapment and sonic culture has eluded physical, political and cultural borders in contemporary society; street vendors, fortune tellers, time keepers from a variety of sources portray a vivid testimony of how everyday men and women resist dominance and power, wherever they are.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of The Year constructs a tapestry of the sound of urban Cuba as the country evolves, and the island's basic diversity of discourse changes in a dramatic and even theatrical manner, and thereby in the perception of the island from abroad.

Like birds, migratory beings par excellence, humans follow in their desire to access new knowledge. Like birds, they construct temporary homes. Like birds, at times they found their metaphorical wings clipped by the constraint of transparent cages. And, like birds, people keep singing their songs of hope and freedom. As the phrase "free as a bird" conjures the image of a bird singing, so does 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year. Like birds we had trace transatlantic journeys protected an embraced by the beauty and power of fierce Yemaya.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons Neil Leonard
Brookline January 2013

Songs of Freedom

María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Neil Leonard have been collaborating for the past twenty years on installations and performances that speak of the perfect symbiosis between art and music. The combined visual and musical language of 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year adds up to a highly poetic multimedia work that is rich with metaphors and cultural references. This large-scale installation, comprised of birdcages, video, and sound, highlights the importance of cross-cultural and multidisciplinary crossover as key aspects of their work. Their collaborations are typically inspired by a mutual dedication to cultural understanding, tolerance, and diversity, coupled with a genuine interest in the plight of others. Their shared belief in the potential role of the artist as an agent of change, and the power of art to foster societal transformation shines throughout their work. As poetical/political leaders for a better future Campos-Pons and Leonard are at the forefront of something truly significant conscious contemporary art practice.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year is a direct response to the central theme of the 55th Venice Bienna- le - The Enyclopedic Museum. The number 53 represents their current mutual age while the number 54 signifies the number of years since the Cuban Revolution. Particularly for Campos-Pons, the number fi ve is important on a personal level as it relates to the Santería goddess Oshun. As the deity of fresh waters, known for healing the sick, Oshun is a powerful symbol of women's strength. According to Santería ritual, at the end of each year a group of priests gathers for a process of divination to access the Santería goddesses' predictions for the following year. The result of this reading is known as 'The Letter of the Year'. Accordingly, each year is defi ned by various factors such as a particular color, animal, fl ag and deity. In preparation for this collaborative work, Campos-Pons and Leonard collected the data relating to the letter of the year for the past 54 years and integrated it into their installation.

Situated immediately across the piazza from the exhibition site of 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year is San Marco Basilica, where Western composers such as Giovanni Gabrieli fi rst wrote antiphonal scores in the 16th century. These scores included instructions to place musicians in various locations inside San Marco Basilica in order to create site- specifi c resonances as spatial counterpoint. This is echoed in the sound component of 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year, where the voices of the Cuban street sellers create a spatial counterpoint that is similarly antiphonal. As such, the interplay of voices, reminiscent of the sonic innovations that were explored in Venice during the Renaissance, gives the installation addi- tional site-specific resonance. The polyphony heard on the streets of Cuba today is characterized by the unusually sonorous, poetic, and dramatic sales pitch of the street sellers. Within the specifi c context of the installation their voices defy static notions of time, space and locality, and create a sonorous dialogue surrounding notions of entrapment and freedom.
It bears historical significance that Campos-Pons and Leonard were invited, along with Cuban artists residing in Cuba and Cuban artists from the Diaspora, to participate in The Cuban Pavilion of the Veni- ce Biennale. Their cross-disciplinary collaboration effectively dissolves many theoretical and ideological boundaries, while it also signals the dissolution of geopolitical divides between Cuba and The United States. The project is perhaps best described as a politically and socially engaged artistic dialogue that is born from the beauty of shared dreams, the collective experience of human existence, an inclusive notion of cosmopolitanism, and a commitment to stimulating positive social change through awareness and tolerance.
María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Neil Leonard were interested in investigating the implications of permanency versus migration, revealing the inherent limitations and possibilities

associated with both a local and cosmopolitan lifestyle. The work is carefully woven together from the beautiful, yet sometimes ragged, threads of daily life. Personal experience, history, religion, politics and cultural identity are all part of the intricate weave.

The raw beauty of what plays out naturally on the streets is set against the documentary style of the personal stories, dreams, hopes and memories that are conveyed in the video vignettes. How humans are influenced by their surroundings is emphasized throughout the work – where we live geographically speaking, our relationship to our immediate and extended families, and the surrounding architecture of where we live all affect our hopes, dreams, and aspirations. The stories that come to life inside the birdcages are as rich and varied as the life stories of any group of people anywhere in the world. While the birdcage is certainly a powerful metaphor for entrapment, this work reveals that the existential predicament of feeling trapped is not strictly limited to those who have been left behind, it also extends to those who have left their homeland behind. Perhaps most importantly, the work evokes the power of the imagination to dream and hope for a better future under any circumstances.

The inherent restlessness that comes from an ongoing quest for personal freedom, understood both on a personal level and within the wider context of the shared collective experience of migration, is beautifully conveyed through the combined impact of images, objects and sounds. The underlying message transcends geographical boundaries, and suggests that somehow wherever one is, there is always a longing for someplace, for someone, for what was, for what might be. The paradox of human existence is expressed in the songs of freedom that ring throughout. We hear the painful melody of love and loss, longing and separation, set against the harmony of everyday street sounds, and the melodious sales pitch of the pregoneros who are dependant on selling their wares on the street to make a living.

The precise documentation of everyday details that might otherwise be overlooked equates to a detailed account of the precious experience of being alive as set against the invisibility of hidden dreams. By placing the immateriality of life experience within the specifi c architectural framework of a carefully constructed pile of birdcages, Campos-Pons and Leonard visualize people's dreams, hopes and ambitions. Their installations are complimented by beautifully orchestrated artistic interventions that literally intervene in the daily lives of various people, and offer the audience something real in exchange for their presence and time. Ultimately, Campos-Pons and Leonard succeed not only in creating conscious art; they offer an opportunity to sing individual songs of freedom.

The flight of birds has been understood throughout history as the quintessential symbol of the dream of freedom. From mythological times to the work of NASA today, men and women have always dreamt of flight as a metaphor for the lightness and freedom of a bird. Similarly, birdcages, and the notion of a caged bird in particular, have been featured throughout the arts and literature to convey issues of en- trapment versus freedom. From Henrik Ibsen's famous description of Nora as a skylark and singing bird in A Doll's House, to Maya Angelou's riveting description of the caged bird that sings of freedom, the birdcage is a singularly poetic metaphor for the plight of human beings who are trapped in the limitations of their own existence. Campos-Pons and Leonard use the unique symbolism of the birdcage in an artistic investigation that sets the immateriality and transparency of what unfolds inside the birdcages against the physicality and permanency of the birdcages of flight as a metaphor for the lightness and freedom of a bird. Similarly, birdcages, and the notion of a caged bird in particular, have been featured throughout the arts and literature to convey issues of entrapment versus freedom. From Henrik Ibsen's famous description of Nora as a skylark and singing bird

in A Doll's House, to Maya Angelou's riveting description of the caged bird that sings of freedom, the birdcage is a singularly poetic metaphor for the plight of human beings who are trapped in the limitations of their own existence. Campos-Pons and Leonard use the unique symbolism of the birdcage in an artistic investigation that sets the immateriality and transparency of what unfolds inside the birdcages against the physicality and permanency of the birdcages.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year bears additional relevance as a continuation of many of the themes and ideas put forth in their collaborative installation Llegooo FeFa featured in The 11th Havana Bien- nial, 2012. FeFa is the name of Campos-Pons' artistic alter ego, an acronym that combines the Spanish 'familiares en el extranjer' with the English 'family abroad'. As part of this intervention Campos-Pons distributed baked goods, t-shirts, soap, fabric bags, and other items to the audience. The intervention also featured 18 street vendors in colorful outfi ts who called out in their Cuban singsong sales pitch to sell peanuts, flowers, garlic, gold and other goods. The exchange of goods integral to this project reveals Campos-Pons' ongoing interest in the wider implications of the global economy and its effects on social, economic and political factors, exposing a double-edged sword that cuts both ways.
A comparison between Sono qui (2006), Llegooo FeFa (2012) and 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year (2013) reveals that aspects of their collaborative artistic investigation have now come full circle. As such, 53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year marks a logical conclusion to this chapter of a personal and collective story that is linked to an artistic journey that begins and ends in multiple places around the world, from West Africa to Italy, Cuba to The United States, China to Cuba and from all of these places back to Italy again. Campos-Pons' work encourages us to reflect upon the specifi city of her personal experience, which is clearly defi ned by past and present, here and there, dream and reality, as understood within a historical context that is deeply imbedded within postcolonial discourse. These aspects not only inform her work individually, they also resound in her collaborations with Neil Leonard. The distinct trajectory between these three projects speaks volumes about their work in general. Integral to all three projects is a commitment to social, economic and political injustice and an active engagement in contributing to making a difference.

Sono qui (2006) addresses the predicament of Africans all over Europe whose sustenance and livelihood is entirely dependent on the sale of counterfeit goods. Campos-Pons buys into counterfeit trade through the currency of art, revealing its true social bankruptcy in a series of striking mixed media works. She unveils the beauty, humanity and individuality of illegal residents who suffer the double injustice of being denied access to the economical and social privileges that Europe has to offer, while also being relegated to 'black market' trade that is built on crime, terrorism and child-labour. When cutting-edge contemporary artists use their success and privilege to address sharp social criticism that questions the global, social and cultural inequities that exclude most from the cosmopolitan party, something magical happens that gives cosmopolitanism a necessary dimension of hope and possibility that is truly worth celebrating.

53+1=54+1=55. Letter of the Year can be described as a tapestry of images and sounds, carefully con- structed to echo the notion of architecture as it relates to sound. The entire work ticks to the unpredictable beat of urban sound, the simultaneously cacophonic and melodious symphony of life that is heard in cities all over the world. The local flavor of Cuba resonates throughout the installation, while other noises, such as the sound of a passing car, are more global, yet equally important to the overall effect. Individual stories unfold inside the birdcages, conveyed in interviews with Cubans who have never left the island, who are asked what they wish to receive from family members who live abroad.

Theoretically, these birdcages are completely devoid of tangible, physical contents; what is captured inside are the remnants of hopes and dreams, and the traces of daily life, beautifully expressed in images of life that continues to unfold, even in a constant state of entrapment. The fundamental discourse of diversity and change, as it relates to the wider issue of cosmopolitanism, is seen from a distinctly Cuban perspective, expressed in a highly theatrical manner that inspires us to reflect upon both sides of the equation.

Just as sound defi es physical entrapment, and transcends political and cultural borders in contemporary
society, the cross-disciplinary collaboration between Campos-Pons and Leonard transcends all physical, political, geographical, and ideological boundaries.
The result is an installation that speaks of migration in the most poetic and metaphorical sense. Similar to birds, humans construct temporary homes, and at times, humans fi nd their wings clipped by the con- straints of the transparent cages that surround them. Also similar to birds, humans keep singing songs of hope and freedom, and this is the underlying message that resounds throughout their work.

— Selene Wendt

MARIA MAGDALENA CAMPOS PONS
Biennale di Venezia Piazza san marco 31|05|13

Critics and Bibliography

When I am not here, estoy allà. The artwork of María Magdalena Campos-Pons as para- digm of the post-colonial revolution.

What if the universal came at the end,
a body without organs and desirous production,
under the conditions determined by an apparently victorious capitalism, how could we fi nd enough innocence to make history universal?
Deleuze-Guattari, Anti-Œdipus

1.0 Post-colonial in time

At the beginning of the 1980s, the world woke up post-colonial. Since then, this term has become common and everyday. Put together in a historicist manner – proof is the fact that it includes a Latin-based prefi x that generally indicates a chronologic sequence of events – it ratifies the transition from one era to another, from one civilization to another, from one society to another. From then forward it marks not only a series of geopolitical events, but also a great, profound revolution in universal history. Therefore it is a transition and a renaissance, something epochal that has influenced the constitution of a new idea of humanity.

Since then, post-colonial, by bringing together words like “Creole” and “crossbreed,” has come to mean many things: blend of studies and theories, a map and an outline. There exists artwork considered post- colonial, and the same can be said for literature, poetry and philosophy. There are lifestyles, attitudes, products and more created in post-colonial style. Along with rhizomes and multitudes, post-colonial has entered to take part, in its multicolored and multiform guise, in the vocabularies of politicians and socio- logists, economists, critics and even artists. Even the art world, despite the fact that a geopolitical gauge still prevails, has been hit with the force of post-colonial change. In fact, the art world (increasingly mul-ticultural, open, pluralist, deterritorialized) truly appears to resemble that orchestra of humanity imagined by Harald Szemann, more than it does a stage for the dictatorship of the spectator. And thus it seems truly difficult, if not improbable, to reduce to a merely epistemological or phenomenological level the application of this statement, limiting its power to within the confines of the anthropological and social sciences. Describe only the superficial effects, the horizontal ripple, without taking into consideration something that has begun to move beneath the surface of our civilization.

Many philosophers, recognizing this ontological earthquake, have decided to rethink the question of Western being and the relationship our history has with universal history, a history that was written beginning with an absolute identification, for which the foundation of the one has guaranteed stability and progress for the other. But at a certain point, things changed. (From the moment in which the other, the non-Westerner, cannot be represented always viewed from our perspective.) We had to reposition certain transcendental limits, certain logics, in such a way as to rewrite the universal history of beings. The first thing that we managed to understand is that there were others here together with us, and that these others could and would rewrite the origins and history of being. Concerning this evolution in universal history, Jean Luc Nancy wrote of a singular plural being. The French philosopher, in this epic poem of singularities and pluralities, recognizes the discreet passage of other origins of the world.

“From one place to the next and from one instant to the next,” writes Nancy, “without progression, wi- thout a linear trace, one strike after the next and one case at a time, accidental in essence, the circulation – or the eternity – is singular and plural in its very principle.
It does not have a point of origin, just as it does not have a final act. It is the original plurality of origins and the creation of the world in each singularity: continuous creation within the discontinuity of its discreet occurrences.” We are, by now, we-others, plural first persons. “And between the we-all of abstract universalism and the I-me of miserable individualism, stands this we-others. A modality that shrugs aside the contraposition between the particular and the universal (F. Warin).” Beginning with these considerations, it is possible to interpret post-colonialism as the rewriting of the being within our world, and not simply as a mere geopolitical issue.

In this light, the genesis and sense of a word like “globalization,” which was coined only in the last deca- de, appears differently. It was created with the space of merchandise and information in mind, rather than the time of plural singularities. With the space of markets and investments, rather than the time of desi- res and expressions; with the quantifi cation of workforces and money, rather than the immense, intense activity of the other, at grips with experiences of elaboration and anamneses. When we hear the world globalization, we recognize together with its electric sound the unmistakable dialect of the economic and financial world: here, rising from the indistinct floor of globalization we hear the dull roar of masses who submit and standardize themselves in the attempt to appear and reproduce. Globalization fills with the time of monetization the empty space of the consumer subject, just as “spectacularization” or “mediazation” might. Contrarily, the term post-colonial releases the positive energy of multitudes freeing themselves and, once freed, reclaiming their difference and right to exist and tell their own story. Globalization consumes and degenerates; the post-colonial machine liberates and regenerates.

And yet, while global and local phenomena have transformed the entire planet’s geopolitical layout, quickly changing the force and division of power between minorities and hegemonic groups, we all pretend as if nothing were different. We continue to impose capitalistic globalization as if it were an irreversible destiny. Even when recognizing the rise of other cultures within the post-colonial revolution, the affirmation of new singularities, rights and expectations, we continue to think of ourselves, our language and our techniques as the basic foundation of being on this planet. In fact, we have a monopoly on the panoptical village, that kind of panoptical architecture that is our Western knowledge, which remains a dialectic and arborescent knowledge, and when we turn to others we continue to think that we founded thought, art, democracy, the only economic system capable of improving life for everyone and even the God of all peoples. Even art criticism and art history avail themselves of this unfounded right, every time either one describes the other in a banal manner as eteron, diverse, peripheral. Western curiosity pushes us to con- cern ourselves with the other, once again just as before. Once again we consider the existence of others as the fl ip side of a planetary life that in any case we want to maintain as part of our inalienable property, as if it were truly rooted within Western foundations.

“We Westerners always keep an eye on limits that are absolute, just as those that are immanent or relative,” writes Gilles Deleuze in Anti-Œdipus. This power of separation, distinction and homologation is, according to Nancy, the outcome of “worldization” when it tends solely towards globalization. Even while maintaining a separation between the West and the others, this worldization capitalistically Westernizes differences, and does so homologizing them into a dominion of merchandise and consumption that appears definitively hegemonic at the planetary level.

The only community or multitude to survive in its apocalyptic heterotopia is the inactive community. Nancy believes that capitalism is the absolute alienation of the plural singularity in such, while Deleuze describes capitalism as that machine that at the same time decodes and axiomatizes both the other and the identical. We decode and axiomatize, homologizing and reproducing reality with our own metaphysical ideas, contributing at the same time to that form of globally victorious production that is capitalism. In fact, even when historic and cultural events (the fall of the blocks, the crisis of reason and classic values) have taught us that the notion of center has dissolved, that confines can be broken and even vaporized because the ideological fortresses have fallen and network knowledge has arisen, we still place our Western logos at the center of the world. Wittgenstein would say that we are applying a solipsistic approach, representing the world as if our language were the limits of that world: we look at it and reproduce it from the privileged point of view afforded us by our Western culture. Post-colonialism, on the other hand, obligates us to cease thinking in a solipsistic manner. It invites us to free ourselves of our fears and anxieties, of the expansion of intolerance and lack of communication. It tells us not to be logo-centric, and to admit that the limits of language (the only language that a certain Western logic can understand) are not the limits of our world. It is as if a large portion of this world were not responding to our questions. The error, Wittgenstein would say, lies in the fact that we make a mistake in presenting the questions. We think and speak while obstinately placing our faith in our own system of forms and values, as if the post-colonial shockwave had not already affected a deep level, restituting also to others ownership of the representative forms.

The right to be, to desire, to imagine or remember. The right to suffer or enjoy, to believe or delude.

2.0 The World in "Creolization"

We have to open up the entire language.
L. Wittgenstein

In my opinion, one decisive moment in post-colonial evolution is that of the deconstruction of limits, and their opening towards the limitless transcendental backdrop that lies at the origins of coexistence and concatenation of beings. But all things considered, these limits must be reconsidered as flows and trajectories, overcoming an old physical and mathematical image of the confi ne. In this sense, the post-colonial evolution corrects and surpasses the modern-post-modern sequence, just as it does the global-glocal sequence. The logic of flows and concatenations that Deleuze spoke of invalidates that arborescent dialectic. One of the first results is the impeachment of a certain determinism. For example, when we interpret certain artistic categories or practices, we conceive of the contemporary reality as the result of a dialectic, historical and deterministic evolution, from modern to post-modern, from globalization to glocalization, avoiding if possible the post-colonial passage. But if, on the other hand, we accept the overcoming of this logic, looking at things from another perspective, everything can change. This question has a certain importance. There are some categories, like eclecticism, kitsch, citationism, the crossbreed, or attitudes and strategies like collage, do-it-yourself and cut-and-paste that we are accustomed to explaining from within a historical perspective. We place their initial successes within the years of the avant-garde, while their renaissance is catalogued among the events that make up the post-modern.

Ultimately, a post-modern interpretation is given to these same phenomena in such a manner as to ennoble them with respect to the weakening of modern values within the post-modern phase. The eclectic investigation of a Cuban, African or Oriental artist, the curiosity and ease with which he does bricoleure, the kitsch side of forms and colors, match-ups, decoration, the interdisciplinary use of modern technologies and archaic instruments, the preference for performance practices, the relationship with the social space, the fl ow of the symbolic nature of abstraction from figurative to conceptually symbolic, cannot all be explained with the simple means proffered by post-modern philosophy. And, on the other hand, it is undeniable that these artists have put distance between themselves and tribal or modern primitive art forms. The post-colonial theses make it possible for us to study and/or judge all of this from the right perspective.

In other words historical determinism, in its Western version, prevents us from correctly discerning the development and de-territorialization of new or old historical categories. Obviously, many of the current artistic decisions suffer from this ideological distortion. In particular, I am thinking of those non-Western artists (or non-Westernized artists) who transform the diaspora, metissage, eclecticism or citation into a question of battle, vindication, formal and cultural rewriting. In this case, as one might easily intuit, the de-territorialization, the deconstruction, have their origins not so much in post-modern culture as they do in that great event that is post-colonialism. In synthesis, I would say that while the post-modern is a phenomena that perceives drift and contemporary fragmentation on a horizontal plane, the post-colonial experiences castaways and redemption on a vertical plane. While one mixes dialectically with the modern, the other cannot help but be reborn as a time and space, hypothesizing a history of its own outside diaectic determinism. The way they look from another modern and post-modern position. In fact, the decisive question appears to be he positioning – transcendental, Wittgenstein might say – of an investment first and foremost on the logical and

ontological plane. The immense work of anamnesis, reelaboration, deconstruction, is an activity connected with this positioning above and beyond anything else.
While on another, this time more horizontal plane, the new subjectivity and multitudes transform the planetary landscape, de-territorializing into flows, fluxes and trajectories. I Conserving as our only point of reference our own Western logic, which is also at once a history and policy that we tend to believe is universal just as (and inasmuch as) our ideologies and our markets, we do not perceive the importance of the phenomenon and its difference.

I would note that this new evolutionary phase of being enriches our civilization of thought, multiplying the number of shades, suggestions and differences in our world. It is a question of relative importance when we attempt to correctly evaluate the difference between a certain "worldization" of multitudes and singularities and the other. Glocalization, in fact, is the new, fantasticalversion of dialectic universalism which, without other and possible alternatives, seems to be able to recreate and impose its culture, economy, technique and politics on everyone and everything Western. In order to identify, in the abstract, just how far it operates and transmits that imaginative power that is the capitalistic reproduction of time and space, of being and non-being, the West has redesigned two separate dimensions; two diverse limits – the global and the local. However, these are two limits that belong as much to capitalism as they do to Western logo-centrism, a system of civilization that seems to be limitless and victorious. Like a Leviathan God that covers and dominates every margin and every point, this system grows and triumphs from within the glocal globalization.

And yet this globalization of the world, which never ceases reproducing and regenerating itself, today is forced to come to terms with the "Creolization" or de-territorialization of the world and its beings. The post-colonial drift represents an actuality that is different, rather than universal and hegemonic. We might say that it is the new flux, up and coming despite globalization. Basically a diverse civilization that produces the new and the different, which snaps the chain of events (modern-post-modern, global-glocal) and undoes the quantifi cation of qualities (capitalism and globalization).

But this new, civilization-producing reality, this difference that advances in flows of multitudes and singularities, by concatenations de-territorializing itself on the invasive and invading evel of capitalism, is the result of a process of anamnesis and re-elaboration, of deconstruction and general rewriting of particular universal history, of chronicles and memory, of genealogy and biology. The other, the non-Western, who, as Deleuze might say, has been up until this day decoded and axiomatized by capitalism, has finally taken possession of the instruments and forms of representation, and is currently laboring to reconstruct his own identity, his own history, his own art and literature, his own cinema and poetry, his own sexuality and religiousness. This is the great change currently underway. The rewriting of universal history there where it may still be possible to find innocence and enjoyment, imagination and utopia…

The battles for self-determination and for the recognition of one's rights, the re-appropriation of one's own history, the criticism of ideologies and historical revisionism, are all part of a cultural social political economic process that has, little by little, restituted to the "others," (the oppressed, the exiled, the minority populations and peripheral groups) dominion over representation, the control of a critical con- science, the possibility to decide the forms an methods of representation, conceptual strategies, attitudes, the tools to work with, iconographic examples and much, much more. Multiculturalism, or better yet, interculturalism never managed on its own to upend the equilibriums and power games – the powers and knowledge, as Foucault would call them – as it has been able to do in these past few years. We are at the beginning of a new "humanity," and only some decades from now will we know what and how many parallel realities have been produced by the openness towards all those forms of high and

low culture that have sprung up at the margins of the empire, or beneath its surface. For now it is too soon and only over the past few years have post-colonialism and post-modern been dialectically sparring within that complex fi eld of forms of life and geographies that "surmodernity" has become. But one thing is certain: art is no longer a cultural product of the West, its form for representing the world and its own facts. And, as Al-thusser would say, if today any one problem surpasses the others and appears more cogent to us, it would be precisely this re-appropriation of universal history by the non-Westernized world. In other words, that historical process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the non-Western forms of representation that is initiated when all those populations and individuals who were oppressed and subjugated up until recently freed themselves of the West's hegemonic dominion, and had the opportunity to participate "in the construction of humanity," working on that de-territorialization of the imagination and desires that Appuradai writes of in his wonderful book, Modernity at Large.

"The beginning of critical elaboration," writes Gramsci, "is the knowledge of that which has really happened, in other words when you recognize yourself as a product of a historical process that has taken place up until now, and which has left behind in you an infi nite number of details gathered together without the help of an inventory." Now we can say that the artistic investigation of many contemporary artists of African, Cuban, Arab or Indian origins seems most like the search for a lost self. This self is most like Proustian memory. The identity is lost insofar as it has been alienated, misplaced, abandoned, and the non-Western man has lived without his own home and confines, having had to renounce and forget his own roots and memories. Nevertheless, we are standing before an important investigation that continues to develop, and it compares itself to and dialogues with its own development, fluidity and complexity. It refutes ideologies and fanaticisms, idealistic categories and a vision of history that hinges entirely on the equation progress = Western = capitalism = technology. This investigation a rebour, in fact, this reconstruction of sensibility and memory, of hope and utopia, of a subjectivity and shared culture, was born in the effort to assist a cultural and ideological deconstruction, which obligates the artist to retrace the places and days of barbarianisms, evoking the tragedies both collective and personal of a people and of a family, the days of tears, sadness and sorrow, of abandonment and loss.

But this anamnesis does not take place under the sign of nihilism, because what we are talking about is not the end of the story, in a post-modern sense, as much as it is the story's beginning, or better yet its post-colonial renaissance. Nor does it take place under the sign of a modern vitality that believes blindly in the futuristic progress of civilization. And this renaissance is that of the other, who is now repossessing his own individual and collective self, his transcendental and cosmic id, just as he is his own body and desires, at the cost of a dramatic, suffering, cruel re-elaboration of the Diaspora and migration, of loss and privation. But this post-humanity does not pause on tragedy and criticism, clutching post-colonial reform as a weapon for vengeance and offense, for provocation and insult. More to the point, this is, in a utopian sense, a form of dialogue and exchange, of knowledge and emancipation to be utilized in such a way that the voyage a rebour is not simply an individual experience, but rather can be expanded and extended from the family to the group, from a home community to the multitudes in an infi nite process of de-territorialization.

3.0 Tribulation – Treatise – Tragedy

"Indeed she is creating a non-Western space
within the Western tradition,
while transforming and de-Europeanizing it."
M.D. Harris

This is precisely the case with the Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, a woman whose family history begins in Nigeria, moves to Cuba, where the artist was born in 1959 in Matanzas province, and then begins afresh in the United States of America, where María Magdalena moved in 1988, selected from a group of applicants to attend art courses at the Massachusetts College of Arts. At the Galleria Pack in Milan, the artist recently unveiled an extremely beautiful exhibition, moving for the quality of the artwork displayed, the intensity of its contents and for its sophisticated formal elaboration. The impression is that María Magdalena has already reached the point of reconstruction, after having worked on deconstruction as many artists of her generation and history. María Magdalena has passed from study and experimentation to re-appropriation and redemption.

Redemption of her own biography, femininity, genealogy, of her own memories, of those of her own people, together with a deconstruction of the most universal symbols and myths. Coming to grips with the language of the Western father-master, she has reacquired the mother tongue and the dialects of a subjugated people. Here she puts everything on display with an equilibrium and strength that are rare to behold. We discover and admire the entirety of her erratic and de-territorialized way of working and loving the world, humanity, life, a protean and syncretic world, which moves through more than one register according to an eclectic strategy. Her methods and instruments vary, because her interdisciplinary nature is born of her own biography and inherited syncretism, of her world. (In fact, both the style and construction are eclectic and protean.) The artist moves from video to photography to collage to painting without ever lowering her tone or the inherent tension, working here in a figurative sense, there in the decorative, pushing images to the limits of kitsch, pasting together and recycling everything that her life experiences offer up to her as gifts, raising on high that which she finds below and vice versa, experiencing and selecting everything with that mysterious precision that is the loving sentiment of a true poet; a person who feels the preciousness and uniqueness of every single thing, gesture, memory and perception, gathering and reproducing them with crystalline truthfulness.

For years now this artist has been carrying her past around with her. Her artistic voyage has also been a voyage a rebour; one of initiation. But here rediscovery after the initiation takes place through finding the space and time of one's own family, ancestors, one's own people and one's own memories of the beginning. This investigation into re-appropriation and redemption constitutes a work of anamnesis and elaboration at turns dramatic and tragic.

But that's not all. It returns to and reconstructs the break, as Benjamin might say, restituting the to the ruins of one or more civilizations, societies, communities, families, one's own organic figure, a presence, a becoming. It rebuilds ruins, remains, fragments, lacerations though having the strength to turn back, but not though not chasing after past history with the attitude and spirit typical of European nihilism. Here they are produced as much from the Western eschatological perspective and its melancholy as they are of the maladies of nihilism.

And although the experience is dramatic and tragic, it is the histories of one's own family, the colors and smells of one's own earth, rites, myths and symbols that joyously and happily reactivate desires and imagination. María Magdalena relives her own history, which is that of her family and of her people, African, Cuban and Creole, without experiencing the fear of restituting visibility to religious and political expressions, alongside the entire dream-like and transcendental world, to fables and poetries from this post-colonial world.

My impression is that the artist is capable of saving this entire world from a double wave of oblivion and removal (both psychic and cultural, where in one case the artwork itself is the history and the individual, and in the other only the individuals without any more history), in addition to the fragments of lived life and collective stories, life and stories of slaves and marginalized peoples pushed aside from the edges of power, even fragments and remains of myths and rites, spiritual and religious practices, symbols and gestures, the music and words of entire civilizations buried under the rubble of progress and the collective subconscious. But together with the past, it drags along the present as well, projecting us into an improved future, better because it is more audacious and generous, sensitive and courageous. In fact, in her artwork we can admire forms and images that are nothing short of poetic, lyric, as with someone who holds the lives of others dear to her heart, cherishing their humanity and their way of standing exposed to the fury of progress and the meanness of conformism.

In many cases, her artworks connect modern forms with post-colonial content. Minimal forms adapt to her personal universe, a universe charged with memories and emotions, formed by someone who has lived many lives and has always accepted others as integral parts of her own lived experience, knowing that she must conceptually control her creative energies be they diurnal or nocturnal, terrestrial or cosmic. And her own omnivorous instinct, now raising the temperature, now lowering it, lightly and delicately framing both her life experiences and those of others in such a way as to make it possible for everything to come together happily on the surface. In other occasions a certain language that appears to us as post-modern, kitsch, eclectic, tribal is in reality something else entirely. It is born of a process of deconstruction and rewriting, of re-appropriation and redemption. María Magdalena, even when she is expressing herself figuratively or conceptually, when she is creating sculpture or installations, performance or extremely beautiful collage, always puts her extreme and rich sensitivities into play, using her body as a plan and warehouse for perceptions and memories, passions and desires, apparitions and revelations founded on another story: the personal, family, universal story that has been reduced to rubble and fragmented a thousand times over by our progress, by our history; world of values and signs, of thoughts and fantasies that she rediscovers and rebuilds. Here we are privy to her biography and the many lives she has lived in the South of the world. The event, the revealing instant, is the body, and the epiphany is the trace of this desirous machine that is our body. But nevertheless, María Magdalena does not work on the presentation of fragments and remains like rubble and waste. Ms. Campos-Pons (and herein lies her strength and the value of her work), manages to give us back the archeological experience in the accomplished form of storytelling and epos.

The exhibition that has been put on display in Galleria Pack was born of a decidedly radical creative and existential bet. The artist moved with her husband to the Italian city of Padua, where he traveled to obtain a research doctorate. But like an exile or refugee, a castaway, she decided to work starting from nothing, carrying nothing with her, and beginning in a bare studio. In other words, she realized each work of art, both in content and in form, taking her inspiration from the city's landscape, using local material and instruments, gathering data and images literally off the street. Here, for example, we see street vendors and their products, which she has reinterpreted, transforming them into frames and passé partout. Or a kind of curtain, inside which a nomad might find refuge. n this case, she has used an entire piece of

leather that has been worked on and embellished with a fl oral decoration motif. We might say that she manually labors over objects and products that are produced and packaged industrially. She ennobles all of that somewhat second-rate production that is based on cheap imitations of designer products. But this is no simple luxury or ironic portrayal of the back alley hawking of fashion icons. Meanwhile a few characters from off the street, foreigners, are presented extremely elegantly and beautifully, portrayed as true noblemen or princes.

The result is surprising. In the sense that it confi rms how today every place is a multicultural universe, a glocal blend in which what counts is the quality of the encounter and the possibility of using one's own techniques and being able to move around as one who goes out to meet art and life and all its sources of inspiration in a rhizomatous and de-territorialized manner, following its becoming and all its complex force lines. Knowing that here is always an elsewhere, and vice versa. And the individual and social respiration of these bodies and desires, of these forms and representations, mysteriously and inevitably harmonize. Try to imagine, just for a moment, how much good this epic poem would do cities, politics and the social body of this.

The portraits of immigrants are accompanied by several traditional scenes, with everyday quotidian life placed in the foreground, and paintings with decorations and embellishments from our times in which trends and fashion dictate the styles and forms; or a genre of stylistic elements and figures that are very familiar for the artist. All this blended language is that which our world is today, the current imagination, but also that of yesterday. Obviously the paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel have had an effect on the Cu- ban artist, just as the humanistic statues of Donatello, the elegance of Mantegna and his students, the foreshortened figures and the opulent decorations. But just like a great artist of the past, she too has chosen people off the street and city alleys in order to build a universal and poetic image of the world, one in which the Gods and heroes, princes and martyrs, the just and the exiled do not live high above the clouds or in distant castles, but rather all around us. They are local people, the new citizens who arrive here from the outskirts of the world, who produce and consume that which our civilization produces and consumes glocally.

And thus these works of art immediately appear comprehensible and recognizable. They are comprehensible insofar as they speak in ancient, present and future languages of things of yesterday, today and forever. And they are equally recognizable because they do not speak of or reveal only the stories, histories and events of others. Take for example the stamped forms aligned in a room of the gallery. Each of these stamped forms carries the imprint of either the right or left foot of the artist, who has impressed with the weight of her body in motion the soft material from which the ceramic cast was then created. The artist celebrates the walk, the Diaspora, life itself as one would a sacred procession; a magical, ritual dance. Just as they, the immigrants, the exiles, emigrate, walking all their life as men in search of a direction, a sense, a little peace and quiet. Just like her, her family and ancestors who were forced to leave Nigeria, sold as slaves, men but not free, non-men, move among the Westerners. The Diaspora and migration is a tragedy of our times, but it is also a possibility for cultural growth, for rebirth, for deliverance and renewal, precisely because the becoming is protean and crossbred, heteroclite and hardly orthodox. We are, as Nancy maintains, singular plural beings. We too are searching for our promised land, a humanity that can proudly embrace our subjectivity. We are walking like castaways in search of our lost memory as much as in search of that which we are about to reconstitute, meeting now in this limitless space of globalization with the other, who is in turn walking towards an individual and collective rebirth. María Magdalena Campos-Pons drives to the heart of the matter, facing the crucial questions of our times at their deepest levels, herself a part of the process underway. Herself a singular plural being.

3.4 Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth. Only love can give us the strength to go forward in the midst of heartbreak and misery. Only love can give us the power to reconcile, to redeem, the power to renew weary spirits and save lost souls. The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change. Without love our lives are without meaning. Love is the heart of the matter: when all else has fallen away, love sustains.

(Bell Hooks, Salvation: Black People and Love, 2001)

María Magdalena Campos-Pons
A Voyage Devoid of Rhetoric Within the Rhetoric of Reality

Martina Cavallarin

Perhaps there exists a sort of rhetoric of reality that art can detail without becoming too involved or impoverished.
In order to actuate this mechanism in the artwork of María Magdalena Campos-Pons, we must experiment the solution to problems illustrative of the voyage, both physical and mental; a pathway traversed by the generations that have preceded it and which continues in its real life through movements from one place to the next.
The story of Campos-Pons tells the tale of a forced voyage, initiated before she was even born, away from her original continent – Africa – to Cuba; and a second voyage, this time one she was well aware of, when she abandoned Cuba as a very young woman to escape to refuge in the United States of America. Since then her art has addressed the violence of the Diaspora, of abandonment, of detachment, of minorities and memory. Recently, Campos-Pons took a year's sabbatical, and her husband Neil brought her to Padua, smack in the midst of Italy's rich, productive and industrious Veneto region. She rented a studio in the city and intentionally steered clear of anything and everything that had to do with work. There, Campos-Pons began again with nothing more than what she could find or discover in her daily life.
In this manner, the Rhetoric of Reality exhibit has become the enchanted territory for an exhibition created specifically for Galleria Pack.

Prior to her arrival in Italy, Campos-Pons took yet another voyage, traveling to the African hands of her ancestors. There the artist gathered memories, images, cloth samples and common craftsmen tools and objects, while her camera immortalized images like her picture of an industrial sewing machine, the elaboration of which (printed in chiaroscuro) produces an image that is surreally similar to Marcel Duchamp's Chocolate Grinder. In Padua, renting a studio led her to discover that she had an ex-tanning factory on her hands. Strips of colored leather littered theoor. Another series of voyages, another cycle of continuous returns.
From that matrix of samples coming from places so far away from one another, as well as from the pho- tograph of the enormous sewing machine, Campos-Pons drew inspiration for the expressive path that characterizes this most recent series of artworks.

In the installation Madonna Pellegrina – La Viajera, the golden footprints impressed upon a kind of brick typical of the Veneto region serve to remind the viewer of present time. A video located on the far wall displays the steps taken by Campos-Pons along the sidewalks of Padua.
The pavement, the shoes, colors and feel of the seasons all change, while the voyage through space and time proceed apace. This first room in Galleria Pack is the place for traversing and knowledge; the terrain of the accomplished and prosecution in a voyage between Africa, America and Europe. In this voyage, the muscles of the foot undertake the athletic gesture of annulling distance, a virtual counterclockwise rotation of unlimited kilometers.
The artist invokes the formal process of drawing and collage in order to evoke much vaster cultural issues. The theme of African emigration and settling within the Veneto town are dealt with through the filters of its presence in the territory; of its obsessive interlocution with the people it encounters.

Cloth samples brought back from Africa are mounted on the canvas, enriched with unfocused photographs of the leather samples the artist found abandoned on the floor in her Padua studio. The Oba-Oba, a kind of bracelet sold on the streets, are involved this Dadaist-inspired mechanism that creates an allegorical relationship between the painted faces of young Africans and merchandise stuck on the canvases. The relationship created is a discussion of identity and dialogue between different objects. Campos-Pons pays close attention to placement and location, adding commonly-available materials to her paintings, for example abandoned bread bags, papers still stained with local foods, an Italian music CD bought from a street vendor, or fragments of purely artistic and relatively ancient derivation like gold leaf or Moorish decorations.
It is an artistic investigation that offers overtones of Proust and anthropological social inquiry. The question posed before the viewer is just who the “pure fruits” are, and what it might mean to look for oneself far from one’s basic roots and homeland.

The video entitled Bar Romeo takes us back to the common faces and popular songs of the Veneto region, opening our eyes to a series of photographs in which Campos-Pons lines up images captured in Africa, America and Italy one after the other. The colored background is created once again by the superimposition of leather samples, intermingled with another element that is omnipresent in Italy: the wrought iron fences that stimulated the artist’s imagination, inspiring this particular decorative detail.

In this cycle of artworks there is also an element of copying and imitation, little handbags and trinkets, introduced through cut sections of belts, buckles, leather inserts, all of which can be purchased on the street from illegal vendors. In an image-driven culture, wearing an important brand label, even when counterfeit, allows one to access a status that everyday people are anxious to belong to. The structure of difference and marginalization, an analysis of authenticity, provokes a complex question, emerging spontaneously from the dichotomy between being and existing.

Sweet Things is an artwork of photographic composition in which marzipan concoctions are set out in chromatic harmony, framing the image of a van and its African driver. This itinerant shop is clearly Sicilian in origin, and offers sweets typical of that southern region in the streets of Padua through the hands of an African emigrant. This mixture of forms and content leads us back to the artist’s experiences of insertion and intrusion; the passage between global and local. The primary issue is never created outside the contingencies of a given story, and is always laying in wait, ready to interrogate man. Art once again presents itself as the expression of contradictions and ambiguities that influences the way in which an individual perceives his or herself, and at the same time, the ways in which a society welcomes that individual. Campos-Pons works hard to reconcile the paradox of a subject immersed in the external world, refracted through the lens of “the other.” The wall of interiority inside which the individual is supposed to feel protected and complete is exposed by the artist in order to highlight all its cracks and weaknesses. In order to shine light on these problems, Campos-Pons is not working for a continuous dialogue, but rather for herself, searching within herself without rhetoric and within the confines of her own personal voyage to find a key of coherence she can offer as assistance for others.

Mojitos, Habilitation and Crocodile Tears

June 21 2006 – Galleria Pack – Milan.

Bienvenidos sean todos, welcome to you all. I want to welcome you into the new season. Let today be a celebration for everyone: friends, family and colleagues. Let today be a moment to rejoice for those of you arriving at important anniversaries and facing decisions made with the new season.

A special welcome to those of you who have taken long journeys to be here today. Your presence enhances the meaning of renewal.

Mine is a long journey as well. It extends back to my ancestors, to my father's father and my mother's mother. I am one of those Negroes who travel a great deal geographically, historically and metaphorically speaking, and I do so with double baggage. In the front I carry hope, on my back I carry the luggage of suspicion, and as I walk the world's streets with head high and broad shoulders I also recognize the double take and the furtive glance.

I have been marked, fingerprinted, singled out and refused entry. I have carried all the humiliation as many generations before me have done with great grace and resilient composure. It is the grace shown by those who cleaned floors, who fed children, who did laundry, built cities, harvested crops, fought fi ghts and prepared meals.

I am here today and with me are many. I am here with feet thorny from too much walking and hands tired from holding on too long, but I am about to let things drop, spill the sweet drink and with it all of my and my ancestors' sweat. I am here, and I bring with me the unwanted histories of Negroes in the streets full of despair, full of richness.

Drink the mojito, and as you do so sip in the pain of unseen tears that I/we have dropped into it. When the abuse was unsustainable we added sugar to overcome the bitterness, when the wound was plain deep, we added rum to seal the pain, when lips were broken from exhaustation we added more water, and when flies were approaching living bodies, considering them carcasses, we put in mint to refresh and confuse the little airy beast, Throughout it all we never forgot the rhythm deep, deep down in our hips so we dance, we still dance our pain and my child and his children will dance with rhythm inscribed deep into their brains, hearts and bones. An unforgettable dance of joy and triumph over oppression. Today you are a witness to the future. Io Sono Qui.

Go ahead Arcadio
Ernesto Neil, hit it
She dances with the first light of a new summer night. Auguri
María Magdalena Campos Pons

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