

Nicolás Guagnini in Conversation with Lucy Hunter

The Legal Medium produced an art exhibition, Irregular Rendition, that extended the keyword of “law” to its full spectrum of uses: legislation, penal code, laws of physics, mathematical principles, universal truths. Irregular Rendition included artists whose varied practices confront the systemic—that which, in being ubiquitous, resists articulation. Curated by Lucy Hunter, Irregular Rendition ran from February 24 to March 14 at the Fred Giampietro Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut.

*One of the artists featured in Irregular Rendition was Nicolás Guagnini. Guagnini’s work in Irregular Rendition invited a cryptic first encounter: his work was a small wooden lizard carved from a tree root, its features filed down on one side from head to tail. The narrower half of the lizard contained two names in orange and red paint: “Boas” and “Warburg.” On the opposite side, across the lizard’s features, were the names “Goebbels” and “Tito.” It is an evocative, if unfamiliar, analogy. Guagnini recommended—by way of interlocution, complication, or both—that viewers of his work watch Jean Rouch’s 1955 essay-film *Les Maîtres Fous*. The film is Rouch’s ethnographic probe, colonial and repellent, into the *Haukas*, a religious group that emerged in West Africa under French Colonial occupation, and whose rituals involved mimicking, in a state of trance or possession, colonial officers. Rouch ascribes to this ritual the status of psychological remedy for the dual oppressions of colonial power and rapid modernization in cities like Accra, where the film takes place.*

An Irregular Rendition exhibition catalog included the following interview between curator Lucy Hunter and artist Nicolás Guagnini:

Lucy Hunter (LH):

*Les Maîtres Fous was banned from release in French Niger as well as in British territories by colonial authorities. It’s a remarkable achievement for a “racist masterpiece,” as you’ve called it, to offend the powers that be. The film merely exaggerates and refracts the terms on which the colonial project justified its own existence—tropes of the “primitive,” what have you. But the stakes are clear: representation, when deployed by the *Haukas*, is utterly untenable. One could summarize the offense: “How dare they enact colonial signifiers—play officers—in the service of mockery?” To accept this possibility is to reluctantly grant the “primitive”*

a kind of higher-order cognition. Representation, be it images or writing, is, after all, the laurels on which Western civilization rests. *"We have books, sculpture, architecture. We make heavy things that last. They have stories, songs."*

Your work in the show operates at a similarly unbearable juncture, a kind of ouroboros of appropriation. Who's at the butt of this joke? Who's doing the joking? Is it fair to say you've naturalized nature, vis-a-vis the "primitive"?

Nicolás Guagnini (NG):

Let's first unpack Rouch's film further. His voiceover tells us of a syncretic ritual, where two orders both collide and resolve each other. The Haukas do have a hierarchy, and the authority atop sends the attendants into nature, into the jungle, to be possessed. They return as one of the characters of the colonial ceremony of authority, and they indeed reenact or represent their oppressors. But they also eat a dog, ostensibly a broken taboo, prizing the head above other body parts. So those two orders are consolidated, that of representation and the hierarchy of the sect towards taking something from nature; and consummation of the killing and feeding ritual. Rouch's claim to mental health, and incidentally of a higher cognition as well, in the face of alienation and modernization—and it must be noted that he makes every effort in his film to present the life of an alienating metropolis in the opener—is precisely the ability to be possessed. What is appallingly refractory in its seriousness here is the double attempt to "learn a lesson" from the oppressed and to wash the guilt of the author as a Frenchman. So the starting point for my chain of jokes here is that I am Rouch, we are Rouch *toujours. Je suis Rouch comme Je suis Charlie.*

Your reading is thus correct, I try to naturalize nature by mirroring Rouch's equation. But I think the ironic dimension of this piece has to do with inserting a historical axis into the root that looks like a gun, and in which the lizard was carved by a "primitive" artist, and erased by me. I propose that the relationship between Boas and Warburg, two heroes and pioneers of the understanding of the "primitive," equates in a mirrored reversal a comparison between Goebbels and Tito. And of course this is doubly unacceptable, because comparing anthropologists and art historians, who write texts about sculpture and architecture and do things that last in the disciplinary order of imperial permanence, to two orders of authoritarianism is untenable. And comparing a socialist regime to the Nazis is even more complicated. However, when you formulate an equation you are forced to look into common denominators, into terms of comparison. Let the viewer eat dog head. And find out who is primitive, when, how, and on which side of the gun/equation/root. These are rather inappropriate jokes. I am heeding Rouch's advice and trying to learn from the Haukas. I am attempting to represent my own oppression.

LH:

Imposing history on the lizard initiates its own gnarled ironies: history unfolds on an object whose very integrity and provenance you erase. But mapping history onto the “primitive” is a confrontation unto itself, since the “primitive” is expected to live happily outside of time. I am thinking of Kara Keeling writing on Franz Fanon: the Black, in a state of perpetual exclusion from the Hegelian procession of time, occupies simultaneously the past, present, and future. Is your imposition of history an act of sublation? Must the lizard be erased for the historians to arrive on its back?

Putting aside history, the present—the exhibition context—raises its own issues. While you would have the viewer eat the dog’s head, you as the artist are in no better a position. I am reminded of your anecdotes of being a court translator many years ago. You had to swear an oath on the bible, and assume personal liability in the event your translations went awry. How better to articulate the indivisibility of translation and interpretation: You were personally on the hook for how other people might take your words to mean! While we might like to think the art world is less conservative, it certainly abides its own laws of propriety within clear discursive boundaries. The propositions you make with the lizard are complicated, it is a thin line that separates critique from complicity. How do you walk this tightrope, and is the gallery a safety net or a bed of nails?

Let’s put pressure on your comparison of *Je suis Charlie* to *Les Maîtres Fous*’s double action of “learning a lesson” and purging colonial guilt. Isn’t *Je suis Rouch* the diametric opposite of *Je suis Charlie*? *Les Maîtres Fous* is exploratory, if baldly fetishistic, and perversely introspective in its repressed guilt. It is first and foremost syncretic, as you say. The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, meanwhile, provoked a retreat to xenophobic platitudes: “How could they trample on our inalienable right to free speech? No sense of justice!” The West shifted West that day, and the East shifted East. *Je suis Charlie* grates at this exhibition’s stakes: has the rule of law eroded into a string of justifications—for foreign policy, for glaring inequalities at home—incapable of enforcing accountability, much less justice? Enter my distrust of representation: I find suspect the *appearance* of order, the *appearance* of justice. And yet, what recourse do I have if not to language, to images, to representation writ large—that which always enables its own cover-up?

NG:

Critique is complicity. By definition, critique must accept the epistemic horizon of its object, if only to dismantle it. This is where *Je suis Rouch* can be articulated as a critique to *Je suis Charlie*. While the rule of law, epitomizing here the values of the Enlightenment, is indeed often the facilitator of a profound discontinuity between what we do at *home* and

abroad, it is still the guarantor of the symbolic order or its possible subcultural transgression in the realm of art production. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect (and the one Michel Houellebecq appears to play on in the novel that was somehow enmeshed in this episode) of the further separation between East and West you are pointing out is that *we* and the *other* are not anymore at *home* and *abroad*. The perpetrators of the crime were French citizens. At the end of the day, what the West wants is to define ourselves in our own terms, to keep home homey. It must also be noted that the perpetrators of the murders want to impose, precisely, another rule of law. In a comparative view of those Laws, I still stand by Charlie.

As for the gallery being a bed of nails, the alternative of walking a tightrope appears to then be a Fakir? From circus act to freak sideshow? Aren't behind those two images the assumptions of subject formation that present the artist in Romantic terms?

LH:

Believe it or not, I didn't intend to reference Fakirs with the bed of nails imagery—I'll admit my own latent Orientalism.

I am curious about the status you've assigned the rule of law, as guarantor of the symbolic order. This casts law in its essentialist position, particularly given that it is underwritten, as you say, by Enlightenment humanism. But the converse position is that of a contingent rule of law, a collection of social norms—ones often articulated through subversion and negation enacted by art. The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks forced an unpleasant collision of essentialism and contingency. How could these men violate the most essential of laws—one's right to one's own life—in the name of *another*, painfully contingent, set of laws? The differential stability that law affords—by means of borders, legislation, court rulings—is suddenly impotent (an anxiety amplified ad infinitum in Michel Houellebecq's novel). As you pointed out, the attackers were Frenchmen, like Rouch!

In this exhibition, I am less preoccupied by the philosophy of Western law than by identifying simultaneously acting systems of law, their continuities and disparities. The show attempts to stretch laterally across parallel systems: Where does the rule of law, for instance, intersect with Newtonian law? I don't mean to open the can of worms about nature as the dialectical opposite (and fetish object) of culture. If anything, I reject that binary.

“Some Notes on Dickface,” your text from your recent show at Bortolami, performs this kind of lateral comparison in its take on hoarding. You connect the compulsive desire to retain commodities to the dysfunctional accumulation of capital that clots around wealth. I love your analysis of natural disaster as the purge that clears the hoard: “Hoarders turn to candles for light and gas burners for heat, inches from swaying towers of cherished trash. The house of the hoarder burns down with all

its possessions inside, is boarded up, or meets condemnation. The hoarder in this case re-makes the commodity as a force of nature.” What’s at stake in this conversion, wherein commodity, phoenix-like, rises from the ashes of nature’s cataclysm? Keeping in mind that this morphology can—and is—mobilized when an explanation for economic crises is required. Free market purists insist that the market balances itself out, just like any other ecosystem.

NG:

That dialectic between essentialism and contingency, or between originalism and jurisprudence, which describes the question at the core of the law, mirrors nearly identically the question of aesthetic judgment. Perhaps this convergence has become more pronounced in the past decades in which the demands that politics no longer satisfy are part of what the artwork is supposed to project. Criticality is a must for critical credibility, isn’t it?

Hoarding interested me not only because it brings nature into the commodity; we could say that as a pathology and as a symptom it makes the abstract concrete. The economy is a great abstraction. A derivative or an algorithm in the end are no more abstract than exchange value and money itself—just more complex and abstruse abstractions. The great Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović once wrote, “Just as money is paper a gallery is a room.” The “free” market balancing itself out is a syllogistic abstraction. I don’t pretend to offer a model for economic crisis (I side with government intervention and regulation), but I like the idea that my ceramic work is a useless commodity rising like a phoenix from the entropic disaster of a hoard. I must note that the works that fulfill this metaphor better are John Miller’s gold reliefs, hugely influential on me.

LH:

John’s gold reliefs are so good. They materialize abstractions through ruins, archaeology; your ceramics perform an alchemy that transforms the residue of the commodity rather than calcifying it.

You’ve framed the demands made on art—that it articulate a politics which extant politics fail to satisfy—in terms of credibility. This adds complexity to the concentric abstractions of money, financial algorithms, etc.: Credibility was the operative current in the most recent economic recession, whose inaugural panic was the infamous “credit crunch.” Thousands of people found themselves divested of credibility, plunged in an abject state of *credit-unworthiness* (homeless and foreclosed on). If credibility in art is a function of its criticality—a criticality staked between essentialist and contingent aesthetic judgments—then we might be able to tack an addendum onto Stilinović’s quote: Just as money is paper a gallery is a room and art is art.

NG:

Your “art is art” tautology equating the tautological structure of the

economy to the function of art has been explored by Allan Kaprow in his distinction (or lack thereof) between art-art, non-art, and anti-art; and Ad Reinhardt's "Art-As-Art" text. Unsurprisingly, both studied under Meyer Shapiro—ostensibly a Marxist. Jean-Luc Godard once said that art's permanent struggle is not to instantly become culture—perhaps then turning culture into art can extend this pubescent ideal contestatory state?