

SIMONE MENEGOI. So, what were we talking about?

OSCAR SANTILLÁN. We were talking about the fabric of reality. I'm captivated by the mismatch between reality and perception. We are surrounded by a reality that possesses endless possibilities. However, due to the limitations of our senses, we are unable to acknowledge all of them. Our senses are limited while reality is limitless. The human brain relies so much on pattern-recognition that it becomes difficult to register any aspect of reality that does not belong to a familiar pattern. Let me give you a very grounded example of this.

S.M. Tell me.

O.S. Any given day, you are walking on the street, the sky is open, not a single cloud in sight, and suddenly one drop of water falls on your skin.

S.M. Yes, sometimes it happens.

O.S. And you look up, it's a bright day, and you cannot make sense of where this drop of water came from. It is almost as if the water drop came from nowhere; as if it has materialized on your skin without any explanation. If you bring this up in conversation, most people would respond: "Yes, that has happened to me before." Nevertheless, this tiny event is strange enough not to be properly registered by our consciousness.

As one can see, there is nothing special in this isolated drop of water; however, this miniature entity is able to disrupt the fabric of reality. I'm fascinated by these types of events: overlooked events that are neglected since there are no words or categories in which they fit.

S.M. Would you say that your work is about "anomalies of reality"?

O.S. The whole of reality will always remain largely unknown to us, and one should be aware of that. That's why my work as an artist begins with recognising my own cognitive limitations, and with escaping my ideo-

logical and cultural preconceptions. I strive to be alert to the anomalies of reality, to be a careful observer. In this way, observing is an act of political envisioning, of hunting in the darkness.

S.M. As I was saying before we started recording this conversation, one could say that your work is about anomalies, exceptions to rules or norms. Upon further reflection, I think it is more appropriate to say that your work, by focusing on those anomalies or exceptions, makes us aware of how narrow norms are. You are an extraordinary hunter of anomalies. I'm always impressed by the way you manage to uncover those details, like the story of a certain film crew buried by a landslide (*The Messenger, 2015-2016*); or the effect of a chemical process that enables someone to extract all the ink from a newspaper, without apparent damage to the pages (*Memorial, 2008; and Le Monde, 2015*); and another additional example could be Nietzsche's relationship with a faulty typewriter (*Afterword, 2014-2015*). So, I would like to ask you, have you developed a strategy to find those details?

O.S. There is a method, but more than being a step-by-step procedure, this method is basically a reminder that I often give to myself, which is "do not anticipate." For me, having an idea doesn't mean to have a point of arrival but just a point of departure. The first step is often an immediate fascination for something; and this is a very common way of looking at the world, as if history would not exist, and life could be approached without any previous knowledge.

S.M. That approach is not so common.

O.S. Well, common at an early age of life.

S.M. Well said.

O.S. We have been conditioned to believe that History exists, to believe that there is a timeline of sequential moments, to believe that life evolves in a linear man-

ner. This notion of history as an intelligible timeline is really very misleading. The paradox is that I am constantly working with historical material. Let me be more precise, I work with the leftovers of history: interrupted historical events, desires never realised, or marginal aspects of a character or an event. It is not about deconstructing History; I approach the past only in order to find ignored possibilities, not to trace a linear connection to our present.

S.M. Although you might say that focusing on apparently useless, “minor” aspects is exactly what deconstruction is about. Focusing on the margins of a text, for example, is a classic strategy of literary deconstruction.

O.S. Yes, but the spirit of the approach is different. I do not aim to gain any further understanding of the world from the historical material I work with.

S.M. Can you expand on that?

O.S. Let’s take a specific case, *Memorial* (2008), a work in which the ink of a printed edition of *The New York Times* is removed through a chemical process; and consequently, the extracted ink is cast into a miniature sculpture of a reindeer. In this work, the ink, which holds all the content that was printed in the newspaper, has been emancipated from its previous form: it is no longer printed text. It has been reversed to its previous raw state. The material has lost its memory but regained its physicality.

This ink-reindeer does not offer the viewer any reflection on the political material from which it came. The viewer is not gaining any further understanding of the ideology behind *The New York Times*, or behind mass-media in general. The material cannot offer any understanding of its past to the viewer. This reindeer has become a thing in itself.

*Memorial* neutralizes the ideology of the material where it came from. It’s an example of how my work aims to free History from its past.



MEMORIAL – An edition of *The New York Times* newspaper rendered blank by chemical process, and the extracted ink turned into a miniature. Object. Newspaper, solid ink miniature. 2008.

S.M. I think it depends on which works we are considering. For example, if I focus on *A Year of Nothingness* (2015), which literally takes on the blank pages of History, in this case, the blank pages of Emma Darwin’s diary, the most important aspect of this work is the way in which you reverse a given hierarchy. You are not focusing on the main figure but on Charles Darwin’s wife. You are not focusing on the written pages of the diary but on the empty ones. And this choice, the choice of the minor instead of the major, has political implications. I would say that here lies the most important thing: literally, the deconstruction of a certain dominant narrative.

O.S. Regarding the emphasis of my practice on the minor, there is a concept devised by Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff—a Catholic priest expelled from the church in the 1980s—which has largely inspired my way of thinking. The concept he outlined is “the dimension of care”, which addresses our relationship with life as a whole; more specifically, it means to see life as a continuum in which a galaxy and the dirt under my nails are equal. This concept, I believe, is a vindication of the minor. It calls for the overlooked to be incorporated into life.

I think that this theological concept can be radicalized even further. While it is possible to care for the smallest aspects of life, it may also be possible to care for what does not even exist, for the invisible.

S.M. To care for the potential not yet expressed.

O.S. Exactly.

S.M. I would like you to speak about this unspoken core that is present in many of your works. They rely on an absence. You depart from elements that hint at something that is not there. And, as I was saying before, this is a basic strategy of “the sublime”: hinting at something that surpasses our capacity of understanding so much that it cannot be fully expressed. Do you recognize yourself in this kind of strategy?

O.S. The notion of the hidden is one of the main aspects of my work. It is curious that mapmakers of ancient times documented unknown territories by naming them as “terra incognita” in their maps. This was the name for the places that remained unseen, what was beyond their known reality.

If in the past the term “terra incognita” was strictly related to geography—since it defined uncharted areas on the surface of the world, nowadays the term has the potential to be used more broadly, to name what is beyond the perceptible world.

Google Maps shows us the surface of the planet, the surface of streets and houses—which is really useful in a pragmatic sense, but what we rather need are maps that go deeper into space; maps of the bottom of oceans; much more complex maps of the human senses; and finally, a map of the Milky Way on an atomic level. I see my work as a set of speculative charts, delving into what is inside terra incognita.

While the sublime assumes an insurmountable *unknown* that art can only aspire to hint at, I prefer the term “terra incognita” because it is less absolute; it recognizes the unknown as a territory that indeed is possible to navigate, to dive into.

As you can see, I’m fascinated by the history of map-making. It’s no surprise that a book titled *Travelers and Travel Liars* by Percy G. Adams—which is a historical recount of fake voyages reported as real, of travellers who pretended through their stories and maps to have discovered new lands—has been one of my faithful companions over the past years.

S.M. This brings us to the question of *belief* and *trust*. Many of your works rely on that, on the trust that something has happened or that some strange process has been carried out, or that an object was gathered at a very specific location. So, in respect to your work, or in general, what is trust for you? And what is belief?

O.S. I don’t expect anyone to believe in my claims. Rather than inviting the viewer to trust me, which is what politicians and preachers do, I rather see my work as an invitation to walk the thin line where the visible and the invisible meet, where desires and facts meet.

S.M. Which basically is an area of uncertainty.

O.S. Absolutely.

S.M. So, you don’t want them to be convinced that something happened or has been done in a certain way, but rather to ask themselves if it was indeed so.

O.S. I don’t expect trust from the viewer. The viewer should trust anything she or he wishes. The problem with the notion of “belief” is that it’s moralistic; it means that you submit to an unequivocal account of an event. That’s just not possible. If you look into the human brain, you understand that our brains are simulators of reality; they are translators of complex physical phenomena. Our brains are fiction-telling devices. The notion of an unequivocal “Truth”, with a capital T, is problematic because it fails to acknowledge the limited cognitive abilities that we humans have in order to relate to physical reality. Any artist who asserts

to be truthful is just cashing in on a moralistic claim. All I can say is that I do my best to reconcile my actions and my words. I'm deeply invested in research, experimentation, thinking, and that's as far as it goes. In the end, the work should stand on its own. I hope that the work and the viewer walk together in total uncertainty.

S.M. Is there any difference between falseness and fiction?

O.S. There is a clear distinction. Falseness is anchored to the notion of truth; it is a deceitful assertion disguised as a fact. Fiction, on the other hand, has no relationship whatsoever to the notion of truth. Fiction anchors in terra incognita; it aims for a reality beyond our known reality.

Although just now I've tried to make a clear distinction between falseness and fiction, there are also a few cases when they are not opposite terms but rather the same. Orson Welles achieved this wonderfully during his radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* with his famous report of an alien invasion, which caused a large wave of panic. He also explored the topic of falseness and fiction, in a more essayistic way, in his film *F for Fake*. It's about a master forger who claimed to make better paintings than the original painters he copied. He claimed to make better Matisses than Matisse himself.

S.M. When I confront your works, I suppose that you are presenting fact to me (of course, I might be wrong). If you would present your work as fiction, my approach to it would be completely different. I think it would be less interesting.

O.S. Would you say that a disclaimer could solve the difference between something that is false and something that is fiction? Although it may be unfortunate to place a big sign next to an artwork clarifying that "The Artwork on display is real, and the artist who made it is an honest man."

S.M. Brilliant. Yes, I think so. By not putting an initial disclaimer, in the context of the visual arts, you are perfectly entitled to play on that ambiguity.

O.S. Have you ever met an honest artist?

S.M. Well, I'm not saying that an artist should put out a disclaimer about the degree of falseness or truthfulness of his artwork. I appreciate the kind of inherent ambiguity of your works because this ambiguity is at the core of art. However, to go back to your question: yes, I've met some honest artists. I'm not saying that they were the best artists that I've ever met in my life, though.

O.S. Simone, that is a marvelous disclosure.

S.M. It could also be the end of the interview.