

I leave this body here: Reflections on the development of understanding based on the postulates of Hans-Georg Gadamer in Natalia Iguñiz's artistic research

Dejo este cuerpo aquí: Reflexiones sobre el desarrollo de la comprensión a partir de los postulados de Hans-Georg Gadamer en la investigación artística de Natalia Iguñiz

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Abstract: Natalia Iguñiz's research methodology for her exhibition *Dejo este cuerpo aquí (I leave this body here)* serves as a starting point to propose a series of reflections focused on how the phenomenon of understanding develops in the face of artistic experience, therefore, how artistic processes produce knowledge. To this end, a parallel is drawn between the visual procedures that elicit Iguñiz's solo show presented in the context of a pandemic and the philosophical postulates of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Both the visual artist and the philosopher can be seen as encouraging us to go beyond the paradoxes and tensions between the subjectivities of artistic research and the doctrines of scientific research.

Keywords: Artistic research, methodology, understanding, visual arts, philosophy, Natalia Iguñiz, Hans-Georg Gadamer

Resumen: La metodología de investigación elaborada por Natalia Iguñiz para su muestra *Dejo este cuerpo aquí* sirve como punto de partida para plantear una serie de reflexiones enfocadas en cómo se desarrolla el fenómeno de la comprensión frente a la experiencia artística y, por ende, cómo los procesos artísticos producen conocimiento. Se traza un paralelo entre los procedimientos visuales que suscitan la muestra individual de Iguñiz presentada en el contexto de una pandemia y los postulados filosóficos de Hans-Georg Gadamer. Se puede considerar que ambos, la artista visual y el filósofo, nos animan a ir más allá de las paradojas y tensiones entre las subjetividades de la investigación artística y las doctrinas de la investigación científica.

Palabras claves: Investigación artística, metodología, comprensión, artes visuales, filosofía, Natalia Iguñiz, Hans-Georg Gadamer

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In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer analyzes the humanist heritage in modern research and its influence in other fields outside the “scientific,” specifically in art. The author reflects from a context in which the methodology of science is imposed in the field of research and points out that there is little room for the sciences of the spirit. However, Gadamer does not dwell on the tensions or methodological differences between the norms and rules of science (doctrines) and the subjective in art (theories of interpretation); instead, he focuses on the knowledge that art produces. His research starts from a philosophical question of Kantian origin: How is understanding possible? (Gadamer, 1993, p. 2). That same question reappears when faced with certain productions of local contemporary artists that are characterized by questioning the viewers.

The question posed by Gadamer in the twentieth century arises again when we face the images of Natalia Iguñiz’s solo show *Dejo este cuerpo aquí: ¿How would Iguñiz’s images generate compression? Why could they be considered producers of knowledge in art?* This article attempts to answer these questions through reflections on the artist’s procedures developed in her creative process. The identification and description of her work’s methodological steps allow an analysis of the images made for the exhibition, which was developed in the context of a pandemic and national political crisis in the early 2020s. In parallel, with a personal look, a relationship is made with some postulates of Hans-Georg Gadamer to try to understand how art can generate understanding in these times.

In *Dejo este cuerpo aquí*, Natalia Iguñiz positions herself in vulnerability, powerlessness, and frustration to address resistance to gender violence in contemporary times. The exhibition presents a corpus of images distributed in three rooms of Vigil Gonzales Galería. The first corpus, which the artist calls “the state of the art,” shows images found and collected from the virtual realm (Fig. 1). These archive images record the use of cardboard as a material and device that supports a series of powerful discourses in the context of a new wave of feminist movements. We observe the function of using cardboard as a poster, that is, as a “cry in the street.” From the outset, Iguñiz presents documentation of her research’s visual references to the viewers for the development of the conceptual part of the exhibition and the materialization of the central pieces that the viewer encounters as he or she walks through the gallery spaces.

It is worth noting that the artist’s gaze on the collective or the mass is shown with a certain intimacy. This is perceived in the presentation of images in small formats, almost emulating polaroid photography, which is close to the idea of the domestic or *amateur*, beyond the journalistic or viral origin that the images chosen by the artist could present. In the framing of the images, specific focal points are identified, in which the eye of the camera has zoomed in on texts written on posters. It is possible to affirm that, in this first room, Iguñiz presents how she experiences the world of collective struggles and shows it from the remembrance, the close, and the intimate.

After explicitly presenting resistance from a communal perspective, the artist continues her exploration but shifts the focus to the individual and personal experience. However, she does not leave the collective, although her gaze is directed towards the implicit. This can be detected in the exhibition’s second room, where viewers encounter a photographic register composed of twenty-two images. These show how the artist has intervened in the public space with a printed matrix composed of silk-screened cardboard.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Figure 1. Photograph by VELA, Paola. Detail of the series belonging to the first room. Lima, Peru (2020)
Figure 2. Photograph by IGUINIZ, Natalia. Photograph from the second room. Lima, Peru (2020)

Here, cardboard is an industrial material used for artistic production and becomes the matrix of the main image and the exhibition's *leitmotif*. The cardboards present images of various fragments of Iguiñiz's naked body in prone position. Together with the Figure-itive image, we can see that the cartons contain texts printed randomly and taken from the book *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde, and they dialogue with the fragmentation presented by the screen-printed image of the woman. The texts are clues that give us certain information about the relationship of the woman's body not only in the face of the disease, which the artist has suffered, but also in the face of the systematized violence experienced daily simply because she is a woman.

The second room becomes a literal space of transit (Fig. 2), because here the private (the printed image of the artist) dialogues with the public (different spaces in the city of Lima). This is the product of a drifting exercise carried out by Iguiñiz as she traveled through the various neighborhoods of Lima, where she placed the posters. The record is photographic documentation of the trace of the artist's displacement through those places and visual testimony of the tension between those images and the public space that presents different levels of clash and dialogue. At the same time, it can be said that these posters are traces that have an ephemeral character since cardboard is a material that is sensitive to deterioration and generally ends up fading over time in a public space understood as no man's land.

The relationship between space and printed image that Iguiñiz proposes when producing the works of her artistic project generates a type of understanding in the spectator that is linked to the concept developed by Gadamer. For the author, understanding is "the way of being of the very being there" and not that which refers to the subject's modes of behavior. Understanding has a particular character of "being there," which possesses a movement and a universal purpose that embraces the experience of the world. It can be considered that Iguiñiz invites us to listen to this tension: that of this fragmented body, which can not only be seen as the artist's body as a self-portrait but which presents a broader reading. Thus, in front of this representation, we can think about "the woman" in general, and how she is exposed in a public space. The silk-screened images question the female spectators who might feel represented in that body and make them "be there" as well. The connection between the image and the viewers can appear not only because of the aforementioned –fragility, precariousness and illness– but also because they go through experiences that are not alien to them in a country with high levels of femicide, to cite one of the manifestations of *machismo*.

On the other hand, these twenty-two photographs have twenty-two different accents. The register of the displacement of the print in the urban space presents the cardboard in different positions and situations. Sometimes it is hung on a pole, sometimes on a wall, on a fence, in the middle of a sandy area or garbage dump, on a busy avenue, on a deserted street, in a dirty space, next to many common people or surrounded by people belonging to the forces of law and order, and so on.

These spaces of transit, or non-places, are not represented in a small format but a medium format. It is there where the accent of Iguiñiz's gaze grows towards the problems she addresses. Thus, that voice inviting and whispering to the spectators in the first room is presented in the second room in a back and forth transit that takes on a much more serious accent. This experience brings us back to Gadamer, specifically to his gaze on the work of



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 3. Photograph by VELA, Paola. Detail of the series belonging to the third room. Lima, Peru (2020)
Figure 4. Photograph by VELA, Paola. Detail of the series belonging to the third room. Lima, Peru (2020)

art, since for him, it is an experience that involves the whole being in itself. This situation opens the possibility of the search and the encounter with self-understanding because the work of art acquires a meaning for that being (spectator) and, in this case, for the female spectators. However, the author points out that this goes beyond aesthetic enjoyment and beyond any kind of subjective interpretation of the viewers and the author of the work himself (Gadamer, 1993, p. 3).

Finally, in the third room, Iguñiz presents a large installation of screen-printed images (Fig. 3). We find ourselves with the reproducibility and fragmentation of the matrix-image itself to give way to a set of images that enter into greater tension outside the context of the street and assemble a composition in the traditional space of a gallery: the white cube. Here, the pieces of the woman's body enter into a game of articulation and disarticulation in a gear that sometimes fits together and falls apart at other times. In front of the installation of these fragments, Audre Lorde's printed texts invite us to read them and make the viewers move closer to the installed cardboards (Fig. 4). On the other hand, the Figuretive images of the body invite us to take a distance to see them as a whole. The format leaves the medium size of the previous room and grows considerably. The main image in the second room, which sometimes appeared insinuated or hidden, here has a categorical presence and forms a choral ensemble of printed material and texts.

At the end of the entire exhibition, viewers experience Iguñiz's drift through viewing images with different accents, the product of a working methodology that encourages the concept of understanding and the production of knowledge as proposed by Gadamer. Finally, the experience encompasses certain social and political contexts, which in the case of Iguñiz's project, takes place at the height of the spread of a virus.

It should be noted that the exhibition coincided not only with the pandemic, there was also a context of political rupture and indignation in the country that included a coup d'état and an abrupt change of presidents in one week. This led to a series of mass protests that brought to light the generational change of those who participated in them and ended with the lives of two young people and dozens of people seriously injured at the hands of the forces of law and order, cases that remain unpunished.

Therefore, it can be pointed out that Iguñiz's images broadened their possible readings and connotations for the viewers. They did not remain positioned within the theme of femicide, they also encompassed reflections on death due to the national events described. Thus, their images adhered to a specific historical and political context, in which the political power of the day generated more violence in a situation of economic paralysis and political destabilization.

The characteristics of the images in *Dejo este cuerpo aquí* also lead us to think about the critical place Gadamer assigns to the understanding of art. The author sought to identify what is common in the way of understanding and points out: "that understanding is never a subjective behavior with respect to a given 'object,' but belongs to the efficacious history, that is, to the being of what is understood" (Gadamer, 1993, p. 3). Furthermore, he states that the work of art overcomes any kind of historicism in the realm of aesthetic experience. Thus, when we identify the life timeline of a work of art, we will always see transformations from its creation to the present day. Gadamer argues that it is possible to understand how a work fulfills a specific role in its origins, and then that role changes over the years, and there is a mutation of its original role. Therefore, the change of context pro-

duces the change of reading of the work. With this idea, we can think about how the images produced by Iguñiz have been understood during their presentation in the gallery, which coincided with the political tensions of the local situation. Although these images may age in the future, although we don't really know how much, they will leave a testimony, and their visuality will give us a point of view of the events and discourses that happened and were discussed at the time.

Hans-Georg Gadamer also wondered where the boundary between this origin and the transformation that occurs over time was: "How does the originary from vital meaningfulness pass to the reflective experience of meaningfulness for formation?" (Gadamer, 1993, p. 3). As mentioned, it is there that the understanding of the work of art goes beyond the aesthetic distinction. In the case of Iguñiz, it can be mentioned how the images were acquiring other connotations that had not been imagined at the time of producing them. In their origin and existence, these images were functional to local concerns about the violence that women encounter in a country like Peru. However, with the political situation provoked by the coup d'état, the images were not overtaken by the context, but rather the context reinforced their intensity beyond the initial content of their creation. They obtained more layers of meaning on a political level in terms of their reading.

Gadamer points out that this is how the hermeneutic universe encompasses these two times of the work of art (Gadamer, 1993, p. 3). The author places his research within the hermeneutic problem beyond the rigor imposed by modern sciences, since he considers that the phenomenon of understanding and interpretation of what is understood does not depend only on a scientific work but also on identifying the whole human experience of the world. For the author, the critical thing in this search is to acquire other points of view and find other possible truths that belong to the tradition.

When going through *Dejo este cuerpo aquí* it is possible to identify a working methodology. The structure of the exhibition shows the complexity of meanings of the visual ensembles that Iguñiz proposes to the viewers since the creative process is built based on a line of methodological research with defined steps: data collection through the use of documentation and digital archives, field trips and intervention in the public space and, finally, critical analysis through the staging or installation of the images in the gallery. It is worth noting that the curatorial text by Eliana Otta goes beyond the merely descriptive and opens up possibilities to imagine more significant meanings and raise new questions to the work presented by Iguñiz. The enjoyable break that Otta proposes makes it possible to look at the work beyond the systematization of data, a classic method in the academic field. The work between Otta and Iguñiz seeks what Gadamer calls "the meaning of experience" and encourages the viewer's imagination to open up to question the meaning of the representation of the screen-printed body.

It can be stated that Gadamer was aware of the historical tradition of philosophy that presents understanding as a highly superior experience and also sustains through written texts of thinkers. A claim to truth that contemporary consciousness cannot leave aside because that is the only way to understand that philosophical truth from the tradition (Gadamer, 1993, p. 9). Faced with this, Gadamer indicates that something similar happens with the research focused on the sciences of art, which makes it impossible to leave aside the experience of art. This makes us discover in the work of art a truth that can produce a

philosophical meaning and opens the possibility that art becomes necessary for scientific consciousness to recognize its limits.

However, Gadamer does not limit himself to justifying truth in art. Rather, he starts from the aforementioned to develop a concept of knowledge and truth that becomes a possible answer towards the understanding of our hermeneutic experience in its full magnitude, starting from the experience of art and the historical tradition (Gadamer, 1993, p. 9). To this, he adds that in the experience of art, there appear truths that surpass the scope of methodological knowledge and the sciences of the spirit with their historical tradition (turned into an object of investigation) that speak of their own truth from historical criticism. This experience of the historical tradition goes beyond what is researchable in it and provides a truth or non-truth in which Gadamer encourages us to participate (Gadamer, 1993, p. 9). Starting from the description of the methodological premises described above, the exhibition of *Dejo este cuerpo aquí* goes beyond what it proposes and raises what Hans-Georg Gadamer appeals to. Here, understanding raises issues and critical questions about the method as modern scientific universalization. The work goes beyond methodological corrections, limits, and competencies. The interpreters or spectators must see their own constraints and those of the author, both in their context and continuity, to achieve the fusion of both horizons.

Final Considerations

Gadamer appeals to think of the act of philosophizing as a space where concepts are developed based on the language in which we live. Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of the previous constraints that appear in such act. Only in this way will we build an honest thought and a new critical conscience that becomes part of a responsible way of philosophizing. In this situation, habits of thought and language emerge in the person, and make it possible for them to communicate with their social environment (with others) from the historical tradition (Gadamer, 1993, p. 10).

In this philosophizing, we discover the experience of truth. Therefore, Gadamer took the risk of developing a hermeneutics that did not want to become a methodology of the sciences of the spirit (Gadamer, 1993, p. 9). He sought to understand the experience of the world and considered art as a means to find that meaning. The images presented by Iguñiz have relevance in the context of local art, which not only remain as exhibition pieces in a gallery for a mere aesthetic experience or the discovery and analysis of a methodological system, but it also enhances the constant search that many viewers have to try to understand their experiences in the world and the meaning of being here (as women, for example). From that experience, a true understanding develops.

It is as if Iguñiz is intruding and telling us to “leave this body here” between her and the spectators. She finds herself in a “being in the middle,” which invites us to participate in the drift she has experienced to do the work and produce relevant knowledge linked to appropriation, history, and language. Faced with this interpellation, we can do a wordplay with freedom and fantasy, based on the etymology of the word “understand” in German, because curiously, the verb *verstehen* derives from the verb *stehen*, which means “to stand.” Thus, the visual representation of that body printed on the cardboard: lying down, thrown, dead, abandoned, or however we want to see it, does not remain only in the subject-object correspondence but is attached to “the being of what is understood.” And it could be read

as a body that ends up “standing up” to the understanding of our human experience in the world. It is there where the work of art appeals to the same consistency of understanding.

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