



JOSÉ ANTONIO HERNÁNDEZ-DIEZ

JOSÉ ANTONIO HERNÁNDEZ-DÍEZ

NEW MUSEUM

JOSÉ ANTONIO

Organized by Dan Cameron & Gerardo Mosquera

ESSAYS BY:

Gerardo Mosquera

Monica Amor

Dan Cameron

Jesús Fuenmayor

HERNÁNDEZ-DIEZ

José Antonio Hernández-Díez

Published in association with the exhibition *José Antonio Hernández-Díez*.

Co-curated by Dan Cameron,
Senior Curator and Gerardo
Mosquera, Adjunct Curator —
New Museum of Contemporary Art

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Exhibition Schedule

SEPTEMBER 13–NOVEMBER 17, 2002

PALM BEACH INSTITUTE
OF CONTEMPORARY ART
Lake Worth, Florida

JANUARY 24–APRIL 6, 2003

SITE SANTA FE
Santa Fe, New Mexico

JULY 8–SEPTEMBER 21, 2003

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FRONT & BACK COVER:

Marx, 2000
C-print photograph
82 5/8 x 63 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

INSIDE FRONT & BACK COVER:

Sin título (Untitled), 1996
wood, roller-skate wheels
86 5/8 x 9 7/8 x 3 7/8 inches
Colección Ignacio e Valentina Oberto, Caracas

ESSAYS

MP3 Files (work in progress)
glicée prints
grande mp3 n° 8 vol.2, 2002 (pg. 9)
pequeño mp3 n° 8 vol.1, 2002 (pg. 13)
pequeño mp3 n° 9, 2002 (pg. 17)
Pantalla 3, 2002 (pg. 21)
Pantalla 4, 2002 (pg. 27)

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| | | |
|--|----|------------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | 7 | DAN CAMERON |
| FOREWORD | 8 | LISA PHILLIPS |
| <i>Arroz Con Mango</i> | 10 | GERARDO MOSQUERA |
| <i>The Absent, Spectral, & Gigantic in the Work of José Antonio Hernández-Díez</i> | 14 | MONICA AMOR |
| <i>The Brotherhood</i> | 18 | DAN CAMERON |
| <i>Chronicle of an Oeuvre</i> | 22 | JESÚS FUENMAYOR |
| EXHIBITIONS | 28 | |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 30 | |
| EXHIBITION CHECKLIST | 31 | |
| CATALOGUE OF WORKS | 33 | |
| TRUSTEES | 96 | |
| NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART STAFF | 96 | |

This
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This survey of José Antonio Hernández-Díez's work grew out of discussions with Gerardo Mosquera that began in early 1996. Hernández-Díez is an artist whose work both of us were particularly enthusiastic about at the time, and the intervening years have seen a growing recognition of his accomplishments throughout the international art community. In the meantime, this exhibition has also metamorphosed somewhat, so that its perspective is enhanced considerably by the addition of certain key works produced during the past five years.

For his patience and hard work on the preparation of this exhibition over the course of six years, and for his unflagging good humor throughout a series of unfortunate delays, I am deeply indebted to the artist, José Antonio Hernández-Díez. Another important artistic talent that deserves mention here is that of catalogue designer, Paul Carlos, whose insight into Hernández-Díez's work has resulted in an interpretive tool that is also a beautiful object in itself. Along with the design and the artworks on view, this publication would also not have been possible without the sensitive and insightful essays produced by art historian Monica Amor, art critic Jesús Fuenmayor, and my New Museum colleague and co-curator, Gerardo Mosquera.

A considerable amount of research has gone into the selection of works for the exhibition, as well as for the images used in this publication, a task that would have not been possible without the enthusiastic support of the artist's galleries. For this, an enormous thank you is owed to Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid; Galería Estrany-de la Mota, Barcelona; Galeria Fortes-Vilaça, São Paulo; and Sandra Gering Gallery, New York.

Also, the lenders to the exhibition, whose names appear elsewhere, have shown great support for this project by permitting much-loved works from their collection to be in our safekeeping during the exhibition tour.

The New Museum is extremely proud that José Antonio Hernández-Díez could be shared with two sister institutions that in relatively short spans of time have become true innovators within their field. In addition, we are personally delighted that Louis Grachos of SITE Santa Fe and Michael Rush of Palm Beach ICA will be presenting Hernández-Díez's work in their cities, thereby making it possible for a much broader range of viewers in the U.S. to appreciate his contribution to the art of our time.

My colleagues at the New Museum have been incredibly supportive during the long gestation of this exhibition from concept to reality, and no one more so than Director of Exhibitions Management John Hatfield, who has overseen this exhibition's development with precision and enthusiasm. Curatorial Fellow Johanna Burton's aid with organizing catalogue essays and loans of artworks has been thoroughly indispensable, as has Associate Curator Anne Ellegood's persistent organizing work for the exhibition tour. Naturally, the constant encouragement of Director Lisa Phillips and Deputy Director Dennis Szakacs provide the best possible motivation for making the effort to keep aiming higher with each New Museum exhibition.

Finally, none of this would be possible were it not for the timely award of exhibition presentation support from the National Endowment for the Arts, and of generous grants by individuals and foundations, including the Cisneros Family Foundation, and Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz. We are especially grateful for their generosity.

Dan Cameron

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A museum overview of the work of José Antonio Hernández-Diez has been long overdue in this country. Although he has exhibited widely around the world, notably at the most recent Carnegie International, until now Hernández-Diez's work has not been seen in depth in the U.S. At the same time, his name has long been associated with a generation of artists who emerged in the early 1990s with an unusual fusion of media technology, social critique, and dark humor, effectively challenging the accepted parameters of Latin American art. Although this exhibition comes out of Gerardo Mosquera's and Dan Cameron's involvement with his work nearly a decade ago, some of Hernández-Diez's artistic motifs from the early 1990s—mortality and the role of the machine in the decline of quality of life—seem especially pertinent at the present moment.

Hernández-Diez is no stranger to the artistic preoccupation with the human body that was characteristic of the art of the early and mid-90s. His obsession with the physical stuff of existence, whether flesh and blood or imaginary, should come as no surprise considering that he is of the same generation as Janine Antoni and Matthew Barney. While some aspects of Hernández-Diez's work, such as his sculptural employment of refried pork or his large photos of cheaply made sneakers, may seem exotic, they form part of a complex vocabulary derived from the artist's deep fascination with the ordinary as a mask for the truly bizarre.

José Antonio Hernández-Diez's exhibition is the latest in a groundbreaking series of New Museum programs investigating contemporary art from the Caribbean and South America—itsself part of a larger commitment to art in its global manifestations. Following on the (now) historic surveys of Ana Mendieta (1987) and Alfredo Jaar (1992), the New Museum a few years ago embarked on a more intensive examination of the field, including retrospective exhibitions of Eugenio Dittborn (1997) and Cildo Meireles (1999), as well as *Unland* (1998), a gallery-scaled installation work by Doris Salcedo (in collaboration with SITE Santa Fe). We were also co-organizers (with the Wexner Center for the Arts and the Kölischer Kunstverein) of the exhibition *Helio Oiticica: Quasi Cinema*, which was shown at the New Museum from July to October 2002. During the past six years, the New Museum has also presented new site-specific installations by important emerging artists from the region, including Los Carpinteros, Teresita Fernández, Rivane Neuenschwander, Juan Maidagan & Dolores Zinny, and Maria Fernanda Cardoso.

Because Hernández-Diez is at a mid-career stage, it is particularly important to have this opportunity to present some of the key works in his development to a public in New York, Palm Beach, and Santa Fe. I would like to thank my colleagues Michael Rush, Director, ICA Palm Beach, and Louis Grachos, Director, Site Santa Fe, for hosting the exhibition at their institutions.

Dan Cameron's and Gerardo Mosquera's selection, texts, and installation have been excellent, John Hatfield's expert stewardship of the tour and checklist is superb as always, and Johanna Burton's and Melanie Franklin's management of the catalogue has been outstanding. Exhibition support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas, and from Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz is deeply appreciated. José Antonio Hernández-Diez is an extremely inventive and challenging artist and we are grateful for the vision and commitment these patrons have shown in supporting this important contemporary work.

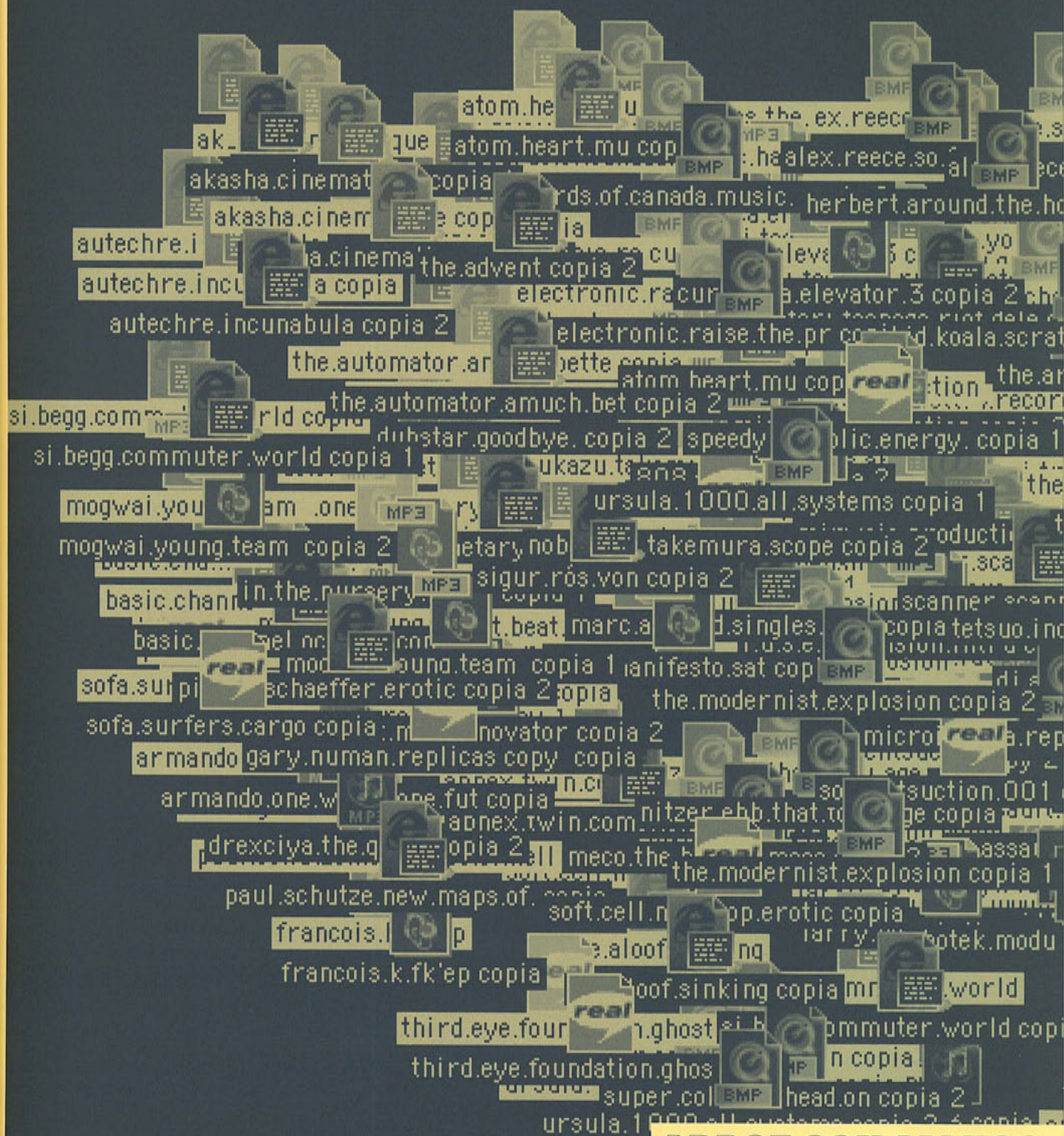
Lisa Phillips

FOREWORD

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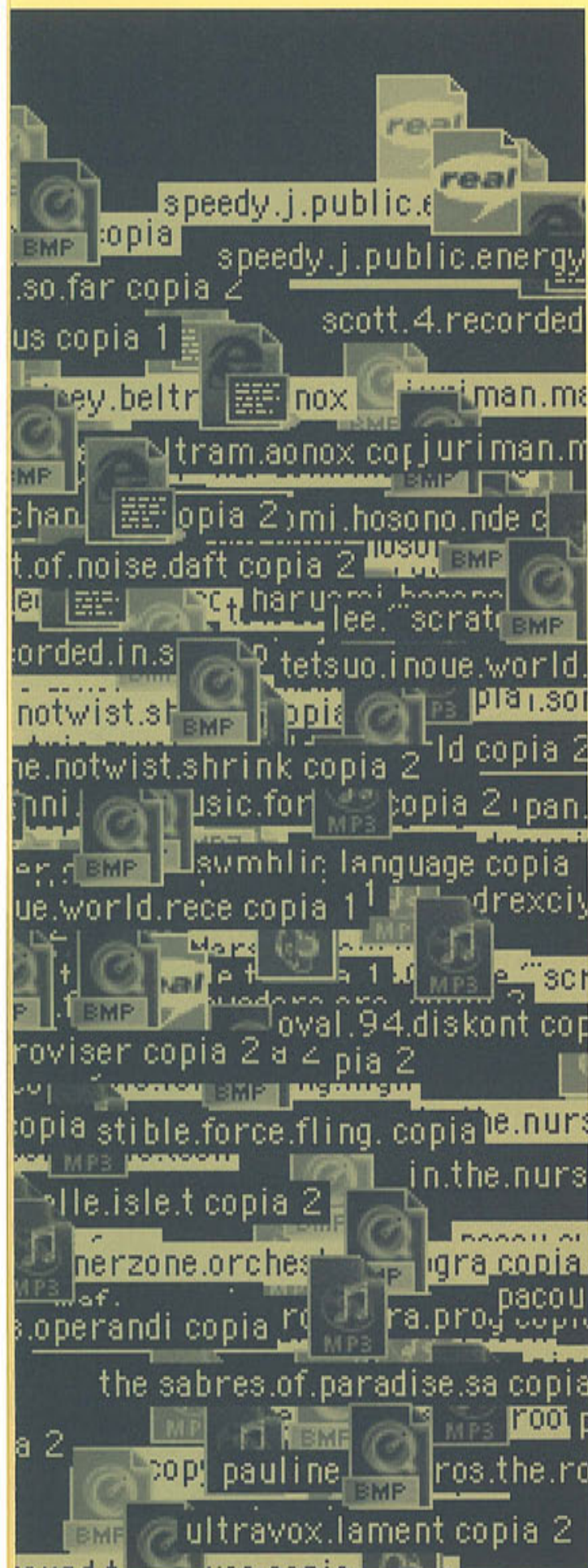
ARROZ CON MANGO:

WHEN JOSÉ ANTONIO HERNÁNDEZ-DIEZ WAS a child, he told his father: "Dad, when I grow up I want to be a doctor." "Oh no, that would be terrible!" his father answered: "You must be an artist!" This anecdote is a key to the artist's singularity. It sheds light not only on his early installations incorporating sophisticated medical equipment, but also on his distinctive artistic stance. Being "forced" to become an artist gave Hernández-Diez a natural capacity for saturating his work with elements and contents from very diverse sources, and for impelling it in other, frequently surprising, directions. The anecdote about his father, told by the artist many years ago at a panel discussion in Bogota, refers to the displacement of paradigms typical of his work: Hernández-Diez is constantly engaged in shifting everything in terms of place, role, and sense.

It is true that after Duchamp, in general terms these kinds of shifts are what art is about. But Hernández-Diez's distinctive sensibility is the consequence of an all-encompassing meta-artistic condition moving from life to art, which at the moment of making "real" art provides a platform for spontaneous responses. The result, even if it fits into the usual contemporary international art "label," is a certain personal oddity that often puzzles audiences and is perhaps why the artist has not yet received sustained international recognition. Radical displacements and recombinations of meanings, frameworks and culturally disparate components, fracturing of expectations, and other unsettling traits all reflect a sort of "outsider" way of dealing with art. Hernández-Diez is the strange case of a professional artist who makes art as if he were not making art. José Antonio's father was no art lover: he wanted his son to become an artist because the boy's playful and sensitive personality would make him incompetent as a doctor. If the son finally did become an artist, it was not only because art gave him a space for experiment and fantasy, but more than anything else, it gave him the possibility of doing whatever he wanted to do.

Hernández-Diez's art entails complex and playful interactions among postconceptualism, vernacular culture, humor, technology, international language, symbolism, social issues, minimalism, and other ingredients not usually cooked together in mainstream practices. Some of these elements facilitate an international reception; others hamper it. This shows how urgent it is for us to expand our understanding of an increasingly internationalized art world. The artist once gave the title *Arroz con Mango* (Rice with Mango) to one of his pieces. This Spanish idiom connotes a bizarre combination and, by extension, refers to disorder. However, unexpected arrangements do not necessarily mean confusion. They can be the plausible answers to new visions and interactions. Hernández-Diez's art might be a tasty and nutritious *arroz con mango*, indispensable in dealing with the complexities of our time.

There is a major tendency nowadays to dissolve art into real life, but not through the kind of conscious effort undertaken by the Russian Constructivists or, in different ways, by Fluxus or Joseph Beuys. In those cases, art in the end was stripped of fetishism in appearance, while its "aura" prevailed in the conceit that it could transform life. What many young artists from different countries are doing today—whether cynically or sincerely—is to identify as art certain activities in which the artistic element is so diminished as to be indistinguishable from daily life. This does not mean



GERARDO MOSQUERA

representing the triviality of quotidian existence, as in Bruce Nauman's work, but rather enacting it. These practices are, in themselves, either banal or insignificant, or are at the point of turning into something other than what is usually understood as art. Hernández-Díez relates to this tendency only in terms of spontaneity and the role that quotidian and unexpected elements play in his art. His procedure is rather the opposite: instead of identifying art with common life, he keeps art separate as an activity of producing specific objects and events to be exhibited; in so doing he uses art as a playground.

Play is an essential concept here, for a sense of the ludic pervades all of Hernández-Díez's works. Sometimes his pieces summon the audience to play, as in his untitled 1997 piece (formerly titled *Aroz con Mango*) in which you are asked to hit a table with a baseball bat; the table reacts, according to where you hit it, turning on and off different recordings of mariachi and other Latin American vernacular music. In other works, playing is a thematic component, as in Hernández-Díez's pool table equipped with a mechanical arm for hitting pool balls, or in his pieces involving skateboards. These last express a certain juvenile, adolescent strain in Hernández-Díez's poetics, which goes to the very foundations of his work. Art here provides a license for personal games, *jouissance*, and fantasies.

Other artists like Miguel Calderón and Joshua Okon push this aspect even further, using art as an excuse to realize their reveries and to trigger otherwise unavailable experiences. In their case it is the action carried out "in reality" in order to create "the piece" which provides the work's artistic significance. The aspect of process is not as important as how the artists themselves experience the making of the work and the manner in which they share this with the audience. In some works by Hernández-Díez, however, knowledge of the work's process adds new meanings. The installation *Que te rinda el día* (*Have a Productive Day*), 1995, consists of furniture bearing what seem to be bite marks from a giant. At first sight, the piece communicates tension and creates a fantastic new myth. But when you realize that the furniture was actually bitten by a mechanical press adapted by the artist, a performative aspect comes to the forefront. It relates to an ongoing, fanciful relationship between technology and the body, opening a new avenue of meaning. Both lines of discourse interact, enhancing the work's complexity and fascination.

Calderón's or Hernández-Díez's personal use of art does not mean that their attitudes are not thoughtful and professional, or that their artistic results are limited or unsophisticated. On the contrary, they open interesting new perspectives. After all, play has always been a very serious business. Hernández-Díez's approach is fruitful in distinctly artistic terms, by introducing fresh imaginative factors without enforcing strict intellectual boundaries. This helps make contemporary art less severe and boring—and more amusing. Amusement is rare in today's art scene, inflated as that scene is with self-referentiality, repetition, the evaporation of meaning, the use of real time, minimalization, the cult of the almost imperceptible gesture, the increase in trivial themes, and the spread of practices that have acquired a tedious character. Fortunately, the opening of new art circuits around the world is helping diffuse more diversified artistic practices.

As we have seen, Hernández-Díez's work frequently involves

technology: video monitors and projectors, sensors, sound equipment, surgical devices, etc. In some cases, technology is not a means, but a significant constituent of the work. This is evident in his early pieces with medical equipment, in which these devices and their functions were the work's main component. *Sagrado Corazón Activo* (*Active Sacred Heart*), 1991, is a good example. It consists of a cross-shaped Plexiglas box containing an actual cow heart connected to a pumping device that keeps it "alive." However, technology is never the "star" in Hernández-Díez's work, which does not orient itself toward high-tech poetics. Even in a piece like the one described, where technology plays a prime role, it is always situated in what we could call an anti-technological setting, dominated by vernacular culture, religious traditions, or childish playful stances. *Sagrado Corazón Activo*'s main reference is to the image of the Sacred Heart, an icon of popular Catholicism familiar all over Latin America, in which Jesus Christ appears displaying his heart as if it were an X-ray picture. The work was part of the artist's impressive first one-person exhibition in 1991 in Caracas, where he presented what he called "a new Christian iconography." A sister piece included in the show was *Sagrado Corazón Vídeo* (*Video Sacred Heart*), 1991, where the real heart was replaced by a monitor showing a videotape of a beating heart. Both works, like all the others in the 1991 exhibition, had an aseptic aspect that combined minimalism with a laboratory look. The pieces and the way they were installed conveyed a scientific environment that contrasted with the usual baroque altar settings in which popular Catholic subjects have been rendered by many artists. The formal technological aspect thus balanced the strong religious content. Meyer Vaisman commented at the time that the exhibition merged opposites "the religious and the scientific, the believer and the skeptic, into a sinister view of Christianity that has a particular Latin American slant."¹

The meaning of these works is intricate, mixing philosophical, religious, and vernacular issues in a provocative way. Even an extreme case like *Lavarás tus pecados* (*You Shall Wash Your Sins*), 1991, in which a washing machine installed in another cross-shaped structure endlessly launders a replica of the Shroud of Turin, goes beyond sarcastic implications. However, Hernández-Díez's "new Christian iconography" is clearly a product of the ironic treatment of technology characteristic of his art, which became stronger in later works. A mechanical arm playing pool or a pneumatic press that bites furniture mimicking a gigantic human mouth constitutes childlike, surprising uses of technology that eschew functionality in favor of new imaginative and playful applications.

This approach could be seen as a critique of an age when technology is coming to dominate the human condition more and more. This is the result of the increasing intelligence of the devices that determine our environments and our increased dependency on them. Hernández-Díez symbolically turns this situation around by transforming what could be called the technological condition. His work does not reject technology in favor of a pristine human essence; rather, it hints at the subversive possibility of frolicking with technology.

We could perhaps divide the artist's work into two not rigidly defined periods. The earlier period was inclined to social and cultural critique, a prime example being *In God We Trust*, 1991,

¹ Meyer Vaisman, "José Antonio Hernández-Díez," in *Regarding America* (Bogotá: Biblioteca Luis-Ángel Arango, 1992), 33. See also *Ante América* (Bogotá: Biblioteca Luis-Ángel Arango, 1992), 119.

a video installation that projects footage of street riots in Caracas from a pyramid with an all-seeing eye on a monitor, a replica of the Masonic symbol on the U.S. dollar bill. This was one of very few works in Venezuela at the time that addressed the country's acute social problems, and it had a strong impact on the local art scene, bringing political issues to the forefront. In the second period, from the mid-1990s on, Hernández-Díez's work became more presentational, less symbolic and denotative, as in his untitled piece from 1998 consisting of one hundred TV-remote covers. Nevertheless, this division is rather superficial, because social and cultural concerns remain central to the artist's work.

Even a minimal piece like *Soledad Miranda*, 1998, carries a wide spectrum of meanings. The work consists of gigantic fake fingernails that at first sight look like oval plastic geometric sculptures. The artist installs them in different configurations, sometimes together with large pieces of sandpaper. The title alludes to a famous Venezuelan "B" movie actress of the 1940s and relates—nostalgically and ironically—to mass culture icons and to feminine stereotypes through which Latin American culture was long represented. Among the many connotations the piece triggers is the Miss Venezuela competition and the myth of the country's women as beauty idols: Venezuela has won more Miss Universe competitions than any other country. The "misses" (as the pageant winners are called) became so popular that one of them even ran for president (she was not elected). In any case, the event has become a national sport, and it is broadcast internationally. If all these narratives can emanate from *Soledad Miranda*, it is because concentrating on a single minimal shape paradoxically gives the work an impressive connotative power, ranging from formalism to cultural critique to the fruition of kitsch. With the huge fingernails, the artist succeeded in creating a synthetic icon to rival the cross or the swastika.

Many contemporary artists involved in contexts affected by intense and complex social problems and contradictions have used art's potential for intricacy to expose and illuminate these situations. They have done so by utilizing art's poetic capacities, thereby pursuing an alternative to pamphlet, manifesto, or discursive essay. Mona Hatoum, Cildo Meireles and Doris Salcedo, who have all had one-person shows at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, are also artists who work in this way. Hernández-Díez's art is not dictated by a political or cultural agenda, but the artist reacts to his environment in a very sensitive manner, and this determines his artistic discourse. Social criticism appears within a symbolic grid connecting it to religious, cultural, and vernacular contents. The interrelated video installations *Vas p'al cielo y vas llorando* (*You Go to Heaven and You Go Crying*), 1992, and *La caja* (*The Box*), also from 1992 but produced later for the *Ante América* (*Regarding America*) exhibition in Bogotá, provide good examples. The first was inspired by the Andean peasant tradition of exhibiting the lavishly dressed corpse of a child on a decorated table before burial. According to vernacular Catholic beliefs, the dead child was considered to be an angel on its way to heaven. *Vas p'al cielo...*, with its delicate video projection on a transparent screen, achieves a strange balance of aesthetic impact, spirituality, irony, and necrophilia. *La caja* was a result of the artist's reaction to Bogotá, where he was impressed by the gamines, the numerous

and violent street kids in the city. In this case the "angel" is a mischievous *gamín* videotaped by the artist. The installation includes boxes as a symbol of Colombian street children's main occupation: collecting paper and cardboard for recycling. Simultaneously tough, sarcastic, and poetic, the work connects the Andean religious custom with the frequent killing of street children in Colombia and other countries, highlighting the hypocritical and contradictory nature of society's response to their plight.

It has been said of Hernández-Díez's work that it confronts the polarity of cosmopolitanism versus localism. In fact, the artist has broken away from this postcolonial formulation and its barren predicament. Like many of his colleagues all over the world, Hernández-Díez is not representing his own difference but constructing a more diversified "international language" from his own context and experience. In his art, cultural or contextual components, even when important as references, act more within the works' discourse and poetics than in relation to their strict visuality. Context and culture are understood in their broadest definitions and are internalized in the creation of the work. Hernández-Díez's art, more than naming, analyzing, expressing, or constructing contexts, is constructed from them. He performs identity more than merely showing it—as is often expected of artists coming from so-called peripheral countries. This procedure corresponds to a global situation where, as Kobena Mercer puts it, "diversity is more visible than ever before, but the unspoken rule is that you do not make an issue of it."² Like other diverse contemporary practices, Hernández-Díez's work concurs in redesigning art's "international" language and simultaneously delves into personal obsessions and current "global" themes.

² Kobena Mercer, "Intermezzo Worlds," *Art Journal*, vol. 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 43.

adams, john. shaker
varése, edgard. amérique copia 3



paganini, nicolò. violin copia 1

sibelius, jean

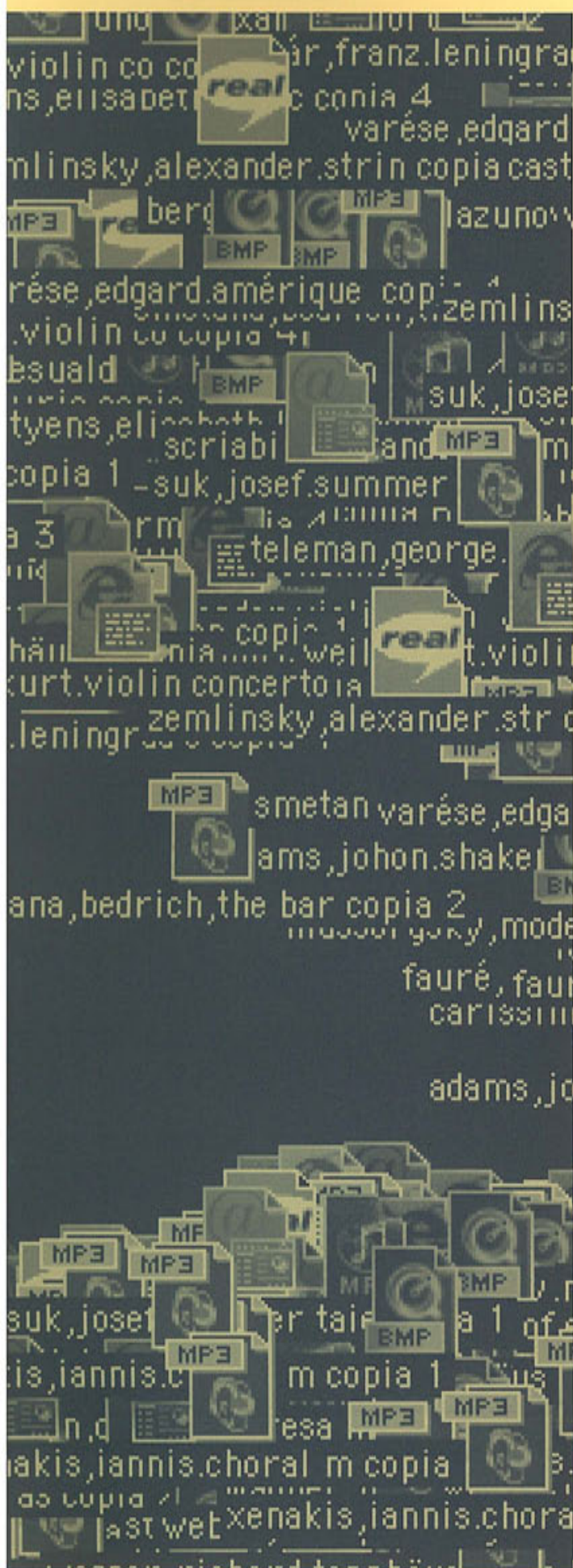
poulenc, francis. concert
villa-lovos, heitor. music for guitar
josef. summer tale
wagner, richard. tannhäuser copia 6
suk, josef. summer tale
poulenc, francis. concert
zemlinsky, alexander. string quartet
laude. Pelléas copia 4
zemlinsky, alexander. string quartet copia 4



debussy, claud. images

debussy, claud. images
stockhausen, kurt. violin concerto copia 4
messiaen, oliver. quartet
willow, iannis. choral music
xenakis, iannis. choral music copia 3
passacaglia copia 2
passacaglia copia 3
passacaglia copia 4
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THE BROTHERHOOD



DAN CAMERON

THERE COMES A MOMENT when looking at the untitled 1997 work by José Antonio Hernández-Díez [formerly titled *Arroz con Mango* (Rice with Mango)] when one realizes it's about xenophobia. At first inspection, it is casually unassuming: a long wide metal table, from which hang a number of metal bats. The piece is obviously interactive. The viewer is invited to strike the table with one of the bats. Doing so produces a sudden barrage of sounds sampled from local radio, emerging from a number of speakers hidden under the table. Whether music, sports, a commercial, or a fragment from a call-in show, the sounds are typical examples of radio belonging to a cultural minority that is at once local and foreign. Not only does the immediate source of each sound change depending on where the table is tapped, but it is possible to have one or two sources alone or all of them blaring at once, since with a follow-up tap in roughly the same spot, the noise stops.

This work appears to offer the simplest form of interactivity, yet it also has a malevolent side. First, it is designed as a form of competitive sport, testing one's speed and precision in activating and deactivating various sounds. (Though the table is covered with dents, it continues to work even after a great deal of abuse.) Given the fragmented nature of radio and television in most urban areas, where a large portion of the sounds one hears originate from cultures different from one's own, the work seems merely to offer a way to change stations until you find the one you want. In Hernández-Díez's re-imagined world, however, all the sounds are from an "other's" culture. With this piece, the decision not to listen, normally carried out by turning a knob or pushing a button, is made through the violent act of hitting the source of the unwanted sound with a bat.

This work was created for an international exhibition called InSite, a biennial event that takes place simultaneously in the border cities of San Diego (U.S.) and Tijuana (Mexico). Participating artists are encouraged to make works that deal with border issues, one of the most important of which is the existence of political inequality. It is generally agreed that the fabled prosperity of southern California depends upon a constant flow of labor from Mexico; despite their numbers, these workers remain all but invisible to middle- and upper-class Californians. As a result of the situation in California, Hispanic culture is associated throughout the U.S. with an economic underclass, making for a continuous, though subtle, dehumanization that permeates daily life.

Similarly, very few non-Spanish speakers pay much attention to Spanish music and television, skipping past it without a thought. Human nature being what it is, it is conceivable that a certain number of people might react much more violently to Spanish radio, for example. Hence, Hernández-Díez's piece can be read as an open invitation to express, in the bluntest physical terms, the inherent hostility that one possesses towards the culture of the "other." Offering a sophisticated art audience an outlet by which a dyed-in-the-wool racist might enjoy working out pent-up aggression against Mexicans (or Puerto Ricans, or the homeless, or Arabs, depending on where his piece is installed), Hernández-Díez does not so much satirize xenophobia as play to its lowest common denominator: the urge to bash in someone's head with a baseball bat. Here the artist is not editorializing, that is, arguing that racism can be countered by scorn or despair. Instead, he offers a crude

mechanism for luring hatred into the open and exposing it to the light of day.

Games are an abundant source of metaphor for Hernández-Diez. From children's singsong variations of follow-the-leader to organized adult sports, he is fascinated by the ritual element of games, as well as by their capacity for instantly forming self-identified groups with specific mythologies and patterns of behavior. To a striking degree, Hernández-Diez is intrigued by how sports and games restore to human beings physical competition and predatory behavior that no longer assure survival in postindustrial society. Taking failure rather than success as his point of reference, Hernández-Diez likes to put viewers into what is commonly referred to as a lose-lose situation. In the untitled work described above, the absence of a precise standard for winning or losing means that each interaction with the table will heighten anxiety, instead of relieving it with a clear-cut outcome. In Hernández-Diez's best-known and most widely written-about work, *La Hermandad* (*The Brotherhood*), 1994, skateboards made from meat, hanging on drying racks, have apparently reached the end of short but active lives, which are replayed endlessly in three accompanying videos. His most recent photographic works, in which names of great thinkers (Hume, Marx, Kant, Jung) are spelled out using the logotypes of stacked sneakers, carry a subtext concerning the marketing of a contemporary sports-oriented "lifestyle" to the entire socioeconomic spectrum, especially to those for whom these venerated names, and the lofty concepts they embody, are largely meaningless. Just as the sneaker-owners' aspirations have been compromised by the overall poor quality of the shoes themselves, so too are the desires of any passing economist harboring a desire to educate the masses about the economic system in which they are ensnared.

One of Hernández-Diez's most important early works, *El Gran Patriarca* (*The Grand Patriarch*), 1993, is based entirely on expectations frustrated during an act of sport: a billiard table at which a mechanized arm—holding a cue—repeatedly attempts a shot that never connects with the ball. The shot, which would clinch the game, is perfectly lined up; the arm is retracted with confidence, but at the crucial moment, no contact occurs. Both the anticlimax of the shot that never happens and the impotence implied in the work's mocking title suggest fear of being cut off from one's source of power, of being unable to follow through what one has started. At one level *El Gran Patriarca* is dealing with the politics of Hernández-Diez's native Venezuela, a country whose recent history has differed greatly from its neighbors due to its immense oil reserves, which give it a coveted seat (and occasional chairmanship) at OPEC. Despite the country's staggering oil wealth, the vast majority of Venezuelans have an extremely low standard of living. This is due primarily to corrupt political, military, and business leaders, who have skimmed off much of the country's oil revenue and produced a tiny, super-rich elite while the middle class has steadily shrunk for decades.¹

Venezuela is also the product of a *machismo*-based culture embodied by the national hero, Simon Bolivar, first in a line of military leaders leading up to the current President, Hugo Chavez, a former army colonel who in the early 1990s led an unsuccessful coup attempt against a civilian government before winning in an election. In fact, the cult of the strong man has not provided Venezuela with

either stability or prosperity; indeed, it may well be responsible for systematically depriving the Venezuelans of their share of the national patrimony. In light of this, *El Gran Patriarca* is an allegory about how the quest for power undercuts the ability to know or to do what is best. Its grim determination to continue repeating the ill-fated shot after countless failures reveals a macho obsession with the vanity of the endlessly futile gesture. Grounded neither in politics or gamesmanship, another earlier work by Hernández-Diez, *San Guinefort* (*Saint Guinefort*), 1991, involves the viewer in a similar kind of dialogue about futility. Presented as a standing transparent Plexiglas case to which two sets of latex gloves have been attached, the work invites the viewer to put his/her hands into the gloves and touch the occupant of the case, a dead, artificially preserved German shepherd. Based on an ancient Christian myth about a dog believed to have saved the lives of an entire village, *San Guinefort* conflates the reliquary, a container where the bodily remains and artifacts of saints are stored and worshipped, with a specimen tank lifted from the world of medical technology. This somewhat morbid preoccupation with commingling the sacred and the corporeal represented a phase during which Hernández-Diez explored a link between the visual systems of organized religion, particularly Catholicism, and high technology. Recalling that the proof of touch is one scripturally sanctioned remedy for religious doubt (the story of the apostle Thomas on Easter Sunday, asking to touch Jesus' wounds, exemplifies this conundrum), *San Guinefort* exposes a contradiction between two powerful systems of faith: we are permitted to touch the "saint," but are denied the reassurance that the relic is indeed sacred. A fundamental link between *El Gran Patriarca* and *San Guinefort* can be found in the two works' shared embrace of corporeal sensation as the ultimate arbiter of the real: the grimly physical fact of a robot hand shooting pool and the touch of an animal cadaver to the fingertips of a gloved hand.

Another compelling, yet disturbing, characteristic of Hernández-Diez's work is his embrace of a kind of material poverty. Eschewing the look and feel of expensive materials and processes, he searches instead for a vocabulary of commonplace objects and images which he proceeds to treat in exaggerated form. These include the oversized bent plastic spoons that constitute a series of sculptures from 1999, the images of stacked running shoes mentioned above, and the pressboard furniture from which a pair of giant jaws appears to have attempted to take a bite. These items have been drawn from a world of objects in which the quality of a thing's manufacture, and its place within the evolution of a form's design and/or function, signifies less than its place within the artist's more idiosyncratic system of codified meanings. Hernández-Diez's identification with the bare standard, or the generic example, over the refined recalls other artists who have explored a similar terrain. Specifically, *Arte Povera* in Italy in the 1970s raised everyday experience to a level of transcendental value, so that a quality of loss, associated with cultural values left behind, inevitably attached itself to the objects so deployed. This is quite far from Hernández-Diez's intention in singling out the unexceptional for special attention. Likewise, certain older South American conceptually based artists also explored the universe of material deprivation in their work, but their approach had little to do with Hernández-Diez's. The Argentine artist Victor Grippo, who in the 1970s made

¹ Several of Hernández-Diez's earlier works, such as *In God We Trust*, 1991, explore the disparity of wealth in his home country with a special intensity, as if drawn to the social spectacle created when the poor rise up and demand to be noticed.

the potato famous as a quasi-political symbol of the invisibility of the individual, may be the most comparable, but his attachment to the symbols of an agrarian society seems foreign to Hernández-Díez's aims.

Most striking about Hernández-Díez's embrace of material poverty in his work is his awareness of the disappearance of design or fabrication standards as a principal feature of the new urban wasteland. In the furniture-based work *Ceibó*, 1999, the rear-projection of a video onto the front of a storage cabinet provides a retrospective view of a moment in the life of the same cabinet when one of its owners packed up all his things and moved away. At first it seems quite different from his other works, but *Ceibó* maintains Hernández-Díez's plainness of presentation and sense of ritual. The bland repetitiveness in *Ceibó* centers on the loose irony surrounding an object of furniture used for storage, which itself requires dismantling and storage in order to be moved from one place to another. We see objects being removed from the inside of the cabinet but have no way of knowing what, if anything, remains inside it. There is no lingering air of nostalgia surrounding the piece, only a mundane sense of transitory movement, as if the next effort to unite cabinet and contents promises to be no more lasting than this one. In one respect, *Ceibó* is about the relationships we have with objects, but it is also about the escape of the self through relationships. The figure unpacking and re-packing the cabinet's contents is the artist, seen from a slightly distorted angle, as if in a reflection, and his attention seems to be less on the task before him than on circumstances taking place just outside our range of vision. The ordinary objects moving from inside to outside may not be able to reveal much about what has happened, or why, but we are reminded that, under the circumstances, they are all we have.

In its positioning of the mundane as a container for a complex range of affective and metaphorical principles, *Ceibó* opens up one of the central paradoxes in Hernández-Díez's art: the tension between the found and the fabricated. None of his works are precisely one or the other; rather, they manage to be both at the same time, with scale often providing the artificial element. In his most recent works, Hernández-Díez reminds us that industrial processes play a generally hidden role in the production of the objects populating our daily lives. By bringing them to the forefront, he has us experience them as manipulative, even coercive. The fingernails in *Soledad Miranda*, 1998, for example, are disturbingly gigantic; otherwise they are made from the same materials, using the same techniques, as artificial fingernails around the world. This is precisely what makes our contemplation of them both comical and threatening, as if the super-race that would make use of such gargantuan accoutrements is only a step away from making an appearance and claiming rightful dominance over us mere humans.

A similar paradox is at work in Hernández-Díez's 1999 untitled series of plastic sculptures replicating, at ten times their normal scale, the plastic caps that hold batteries in place in many toys, gadgets, and remote-control devices. Like the fingernails in *Soledad Miranda*, the battery caps have been laid out for our inspection, organized into small piles and other more or less arbitrary groupings that completely contradict their apparent utility as things. It is impossible to contemplate these emblematic

groupings without fantasizing how they got that way (one can imagine dozens of giant batteries spilling out of their holders), and it is difficult not to see them as blank repositories of the industrial processes responsible for their existence. Removed from the context of actual use, yet easily identifiable from their distinctive shapes and markings, the battery caps become stranded between the act of discovery and the idea of functionality. Unable to use them for what they were intended, we can only mentally pile them into little heaps, aware not only that they belong to a world with rules much different from our own, but also that we are too small to do anything about it.

A guiding principle of Hernández-Díez's work is the discomfort of the human species caught between its animal state and something more exalted. It is the paradox underlying what it means to be human that provides the universal bond in his art, connecting works that seem separately motivated by politics, morality, or group behavior. For Hernández-Díez, there is a fundamental contradiction between the revelatory experience intrinsic to the works of art and our aspiration to greater things in our lives. Marking and reinforcing the contradiction between our desire to act like a highly evolved species and our inescapable tendency to behave like animals, Hernández-Díez reflects a humanistic resonance within his art without simplifying the moral quagmires created by contemporary society. If Hernández-Díez's fascination with death, with abuse of power, with meat, and with gigantism seems to express a diminishing of the human subject as traditionally represented though art, it is in great part because the mass media have accustomed us to seeing ourselves either as brute subjects or as manipulators of vast technological grids that separate us from corporeal reality. In fact, being fully evolved as a person means embracing aspects of ourselves that are frightening or ridiculous, and integrating them into the image we have of ourselves as individuals and as a species. To a much greater degree than most contemporary artists, Hernández-Díez aspires to yank us out of a comfortable, but limited, self-image and remind us that we are both descended from primordial ooze and expected to work miracles. That done, he drops us, surprised and a bit chastened, back inside our newly unfamiliar skins.

José Antonio Hernández-Diez

Caracas, Venezuela, 1964

Lives and work in Barcelona, Spain

Solo Exhibitions

- 2002 Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, NY
Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid, Spain
Galería Javier López, Madrid, Spain
- 2000 CGAC-Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea,
Santiago de Compostela, Spain
- 1999 Galería Antony Estrany de la Mota, Barcelona, Spain
Galería Camargo Vilaça, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 1998 Sala Mendoza, Caracas, Venezuela
- 1997 Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid, Spain
- 1996 Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, NY
- 1995 Galería Camargo Vilaça, Sao Paulo, Brazil
Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, NY
- 1991 San Guinefort y otras devociones, Sala RG, Caracas,
Venezuela

Group Exhibitions

- 2002 Opening exhibition, Palais de Tokio, Paris, France
Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art,
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN 2002;
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,
San Francisco, CA, 2002;
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth,
TX, 2001;
Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA, 2001
INOVA, Institute of Visual Arts, University of Wisconsin
Milwaukee, WI
Arte all'Arte'01 - 6ª Edición, Arte Continua Associazione
Culturale, San Gimignano, Italy
Squatters, Oporto 2001, Museo Serralves, Oporto, 2001;
Witte de With Contemporary Art Centre, Rotterdam,
The Netherlands, 2001
The Overexcited Body. Art and Sport in Contemporary Society,
Ginebra
Da Adversidade Vivemos, Musée d'Art Moderne de la
Ville de Paris, Paris, France
Megafino, Miami Beach, Convention Center, Miami, FL
Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, PA
Eztetyka del Sueño, MNCARS Palacio de Velázquez,
Madrid, Spain
- 1999 *A vueltas con los sentidos*, Casa de América, Madrid, Spain
The Garden of the Forking Paths,
Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, 1999;
Edsvik Konst & Kultur, Sollentuna, Suecia, 1999;
Helsinki City Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland, 1999;
Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1998
Pasajes de la Colección en Santa Fe y Granada, Colección de
Arte Contemporáneo Fundación "La Caixa",
Palacio de los Duques de Gandia, Granada, Spain
Amnesia, Track 16 Gallery and Christopher Grimes Gallery,
Santa Monica, CA
Spectacular Optical, Thread Waxing Space, New York, NY

EXHIBITIONS

- 1997 In Site San Diego 97, San Diego, CA
 Así está la cosa, Sala de Exposiciones de Televisa, México,
 D.F., México
 Colección La Caixa, La Caixa, Barcelona, Spain
 Arte Latinoamericano Actual, Museo Alejandro Otero,
 Caracas, Venezuela
- 1996 MOCA, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Miami, FL
 Universalis, XIII Biennial Internacional de Sao Paulo,
 São Paulo, Brazil
 Camargo Vilaça Bis, Galeria Camargo Vilaça, São Paulo,
 Brazil
 Sin Fronteras, Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela
 Novas Aquisicoes-Coleção Gilberto Chateaubriand, Museu de Arte
 Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 1995 1st Kwangju International Biennale, Kwangju, Korea
 World Wide Video Festival, The Hague, The Netherlands
- 1994 Cocido y Crudo, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía,
 Madrid, Spain
 Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, NY
 Annual Benefit Auction, The New Museum of Contemporary
 Art, New York, NY
 John Currin, Kate Buckhardt, José Antonio Hernández-Díez,
 Tony Ousler, Lorna Simpson, Sue Williams, Galleria Galliani,
 Génova, Italy
 Bienal de La Habana, Havana, Cuba
- 1993 CCS 10/Arte Venezolano Actual, Galería de Arte Nacional,
 Caracas, Venezuela
 The Final Frontier, New Museum, New York, NY
 News Adquisiciones 1991-1992, Galería de Arte Nacional,
 Caracas, Venezuela
- 1992 Ante América,
 Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogotá, Colombia, 1992
 Museo de Artes Visuales Alejandro Otero, Caracas,
 Venezuela, 1992
 Queens Museum, New York, NY, 1992
 Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco,
 CA., 1992
 I Biennial de Barro de América, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo
 Sofía Imber, Caracas, Venezuela
 Sexta Edición Premio Eugenio Mendoza, Sala Mendoza,
 Caracas, Venezuela
- 1991 Venezuela: News Cartografías y Cosmogomas, Galería de Arte
 Nacional, Caracas, Venezuela
 III Biennial Nacional de Arte Guayana, Museo de Arte Moderno
 Jesús Soto, Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela
 El Espíritu de los Tiempos, Galería Los Espacios Cálidos,
 Ateneo de Caracas, Caracas, Venezuela
- 1990 Los 80: Panorama de las Artes Visuales en Venezuela,
 Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas, Venezuela
 III Biennial de Video Arte, Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín,
 Colombia
- 1989 I Reseña de Arte en Vídeo, Sala RG, Caracas, Venezuela
 Vídeo Instalaciones, Galería Sotavento, Caracas, Venezuela
- 1988 IX Festival Internacional de Super 8 y Vídeo, Brussels, Belgium
 I Biennial Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Modalidades de Expresiones
 Libres y Fotografía, Galería de Arte Nacional y Galería
 Los Espacios Cálidos, Caracas, Venezuela

Bibliography

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San Gimignano/ Gli Ori, Siena, Italy, 2001.
(exhibition catalogue)
- Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. *De L'Adversité, nous vivons*. Paris, France, 2001. (exhibition catalogue)
- 2000 Armstrong, Elizabeth and Victor Zamudio-Taylor.
Ultra Baroque. Aspects of Post Latin American Art. San Diego,
CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000, 45-50.
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José Antonio Hernández-Díez, A Coruña, Chile, 2000.
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- 1999 VII Bienal de Artes Plásticas Ciudad de Pamplona. Pamplona,
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- de Diego, Estrella. *A vueltas con los sentidos*. Madrid, Spain:
Casa de América, 1999. (exhibition catalogue)
- Grynstejn, Madeleine. *Carnegie International 1999/2000*.
Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1999, 40-41,
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- 1998 Fundación La Caixa. *Pasajes de la Colección en Santa Fe y
Granada*. Barcelona, Spain, 1998, 20.
(exhibition catalogue)
- Gangitano, Lia. *Spectacular Optical*. New York, NY:
Thread Waxing Space and TRANS> arts.cultures.media,
1998. (exhibition catalogue)
- Sala Mendoza. *José Antonio Hernández- Díez*. Caracas,
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Denmark: Kunstsforeningen, 1998. (exhibition catalogue)
- 1997 Balaguer, Menene Gras. "José Antonio Hernández-Díez."
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Hernández-Díez." *ABC* (April 18, 1997): 35.
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- 1996 Fuenmayor, Jesús. "Visita al taller de José Antonio
Hernández-Díez en Caracas." *TRANS> arts.cultures.media*,
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no. 15 (Winter 1996): 8-10.
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(October 1993): 79.
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Flash Art (1993): 304-305.
- _____. "José Antonio Hernández-Díez." *Poliester*, no. 7
(Autumn 1993): 48-51.
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(December 1993): 83.
- Ponce de León, Carolina. "Alternative Paths for the
Noble Savage." *Parkett* 38 (1993): 154-161.
- Sichel, Berta. "News from Post-America." *Flash Art* (1993):
86-89.
- 1992 Vaisman, Mayer. "José Antonio Hernández-Díez."
Ante America (1992)
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- 1991 Duque, Luis Angel and Miguel Angel. *San Guinefort y otras
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The Global Outreach." *Art News* (October 1991): 88-93.
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Visuales en Venezuela*. Caracas, Venezuela: Galería de Arte
Nacional, 1990. (exhibition catalogue)

San Guinefort (Saint Guinefort), 1991
 acrylic, metal, rubber, animal cadaver
 57 1/2 x 104 3/8 x 33 1/2 inches
 Collection of Alfonso Pons, Caracas

Vas p'al cielo y vas llorando
(You Go to Heaven and You Go Crying), 1992
 video projection, screen, dirt
 dimensions variable
 Collection of Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz, Miami

El Gran Patriarca (The Grand Patriarch), 1993
 pool table, mechanical arm
 55 7/8 x 100 x 31 1/8 inches (pool table),
 9 7/8 x 59 x 9 7/8 inches (arm)
 Courtesy of the artist, Barcelona

La Hermandad (The Brotherhood), 1994
 3 video monitors, 3 tables, metal drying rack, troughs,
 fried pork skateboards
 98 x 204 x 27 inches
 Collection Contemporary Art Fundació "la Caixa", Barcelona

Que te rinda el día (Have a Productive Day), 1995
 leaning panel, triptych, desk
 installation of wood furniture (3 units), dimensions variable
 Courtesy of Sandra Gering Gallery, New York

Sin título (Arroz con Mango) [Untitled (Rice with Mango)], 1997
 aluminum-covered table, aluminum bats, audio track
 47 1/4 x 96 x 35 1/2 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

S & M I, 1998
 acrylic, wood table, sand paper
 35 1/2 x 31 1/2 x 141 3/4 inches
 Collection of Ignacio and Valentina Oberto, Caracas

Ceibó, 1999
 projected video, wood, glass, ceramic plates
 35 1/2 x 82 5/8 x 23 5/8 inches
 Collection of Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas

Sin título (Untitled), 1999
 13 acrylic (remote battery covers)
 dimensions variable
 Courtesy of Galeria Fortes-Vilaça, São Paulo

Sin título (Untitled), 2000
 2 acrylic (bent spoons)
 dimensions variable
 Courtesy of the artist

Hume, 2000
 C-print photograph
 82 5/8 x 63 inches (framed)
 Courtesy of the artist

Jung, 2000
 C-print photograph
 82 5/8 x 63 inches (framed)
 Courtesy of the artist

Kant, 2000
 C-print photograph
 82 5/8 x 63 inches (framed)
 Courtesy of the artist

Marx, 2000
 C-print photograph
 82 5/8 x 63 inches (framed)
 Courtesy of the artist

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