

## About *Los Tíos del Diablo*<sup>1</sup>

Rodolfo Andaur: For some time now as a visual artist you have researched the Andean Baroque and its ramifications in contemporary visual culture. As I look over these photographs I wonder how much of the metaphorical and the allegorical there is in *Los Coros Menores* (The minor choirs) project, with respect to those ramifications of the Andean Baroque?

Demian Schopf: In most cases it was only after creating the work, looking at it over and over again, that I realized the allegories and metaphors. For example the Baroque, or rather the neo-Baroque, is present in several works I've done—in *Máquina Cóndor*, for example, I worked with a sonnet by Góngora; it was a cyber neo-Baroque piece of cables, computer networks and relational structures based on information nodes. In the case of the costumes and choreography of the Altiplano (high plains) celebrations, the Andean Baroque is always re-produced in them anew. But it happens in a progressive way: one after the other the references begin to pile up—and they are references that you can't associate exclusively with the 'Catholic-Spanish' or the 'indigenous.' This contrasts quite noticeably with the carnivals in the more remote villages. There, the suits are more sober, more bound to the traditions of the Conquest and of the *Mestizo* Baroque, which, by now, are thought of as classic. The "Made in Asia" materials and references are less typical (unlike what you see in places like Oruro, La Paz, and Puno in Bolivia, and La Tirana, in Chile). In the latter, we have noticed, for some time, a de-subjected acceleration of the elliptical neo-Baroque machinery that had such a strong influence upon authors like Severo Sarduy, Néstor Perlongher, Diamela Eltit, Pedro Lemebel; the paintings of Chilean artist Juan Domingo Dávila; and Peruvian Gustavo Buntinx's *Micromuseo*, which includes a transvestite museum and claims to practice a *mestizo* and promiscuous museology. During the Carnival all of this is, on display. At the carnival we witness the convergence of the most varied religious, social, political, counterculture, gender, erotic, scatological, aesthetic and even ethical mélanges. The carnival has no other aesthetic than that of incontinent promiscuity. Everything is allowed there, and the sponsoring clergy turn a blind eye provided

1 Uncles of the Devil

that little *cholíporno* devils (the male and female devil protagonists of Bolivian porno) don't forget to cross themselves, even if they're dead drunk, before the Virgen del Socavón, the patron saint of the city of Oruro. All types of characters converge here, including pious matrons, drag queens and transsexual lady devils reborn in some makeshift operating room. The pagan celebration, which negotiates constantly with Catholicism in full view (and with the enduring patience) of the Roman Catholic Church, admits all trades, including a transvestite pilgrimage during the feast of San Lorenzo de Tarapacá, in Chile. The celebration of the Neo-Baroque throws all these things in a blender to then pour out a motley universe of singularities and categories whose mobility dynamically fuses the endogenous with the exogenous and anything with everything. Thus, for example, we find 'folk' characters whose psychedelic masks—supposedly bearing 'pre-Columbian,' 'Western' and 'Catholic' references—make them seem more like the protagonists of an adult-only Japanese animation space operetta (and this appearance is 'in spite' of folkloric tales like the one about the innocent little bear that got an Indian woman pregnant only to be murdered by his own son, the *Jukumari*, patron of the rains and winds, part beast like his father, part Christian like his mother, a kind of Andean Oedipus) ...

RA: It's interesting to question the socio-political role played by the feast in the Chilean, Bolivian and Peruvian Altiplano, and re-think about how within these celebrations, the costumes, colors and decorative elements come together on such a diverse landscape. So why did you choose a landscape as monotonous and rough as a landfill for *Los Coros Menores*?

DS: When I started the project, my intention was to make documentary portraits of dancers in a context other than that of the feast. First, I thought of photographing them in their houses, their fraternal clubs or rehearsal sites. I wanted to make documentary photos. But when I got to Alto Hospicio, in Chile, the first place where I worked, I realized that just a few blocks away from this shantytown settlement a second city was in the process of formation: a huge garbage dump populated by starving dogs and crack addicts who would burn trash to melt down the metal and sell it to feed their drug habits. It is somewhat of an afterthought to Alto

Hospicio, a suburban landscape that wavers between the catastrophic and the post-catastrophic. After my trip to Bolivia, I could never separate the image of silver thread and gold teeth from that landscape. In Bolivia the carnival is a sumptuous affair and the suit has become a status symbol that can cost up to twenty thousand dollars. This ostentatious practice is clearly linked to an emerging and prosperous merchant class known as the *burguesía chola* (the bourgeoisie of *cholos*, a word that refers to the Quechua and Aymara people). This *burguesía chola* is made up of *cholo* migrants who have settled on the outskirts of the cities and formed their own outskirt cities. The city of El Alto, in the heights of La Paz, is the most iconic outpost of this phenomenon. Its most emblematic character is the *Chuta*: in its most recent incarnations this is a kind of cowboy dressed in phosphorescent 'chaps'—the common protective coverings for a cowboy's trousers and legs—and boots with pointed toes. This is an electrified, fluorescent, post *mestizo* cowboy. His only context is psychodelia, the world of the masquerade and Andean pop, another high plains stem of Babel and Las Vegas. Another noteworthy case of "contaminated" references is the *Moreno*, the typical figure that represents the black slaves brought from Africa, frequently depicted stomping on grapes in a vat at the wineries of Sucre, has come to be more like a 'transformer' and sometimes is, in actuality, a transvestite. But to get back to the *Cholo* bourgeoisie, it continues to live and operate commercially (sometimes on the edge of legality) in these peripheral and marginal areas. This is where we find the sumptuous splendor of silver threads coexisting alongside that other glitter, the cheap plastic junk jewelry found in the trash. These are the permanent material remains left behind by the clash between consumer society and peasant migration, which is an emerging economic, social and political power. The choice of the landfill responds to a landmark in the contemporary suburban landscape in countries like Chile and Bolivia: those things that, elsewhere, would be buried, like a pile of corpses, remains unburied here. The landfills of Alto Hospicio, Oruro and El Alto could just as easily be located in Asia, or Ghana, Europe's new electronic-waste dump. So I asked myself, how do you document these two sides of the same world? How do we re-unite, or re-link<sup>2</sup> these two universes, which are actually not so far

2 TN. Here the author uses the term *ligar*,

apart? That was when I decided to work there, with the dancers in the dumps...

RA: Why do you refer to *Los Coros Menores* as *Los Tíos del Diablo*?

DS: As you say, I first baptized this series as *Coros Menores*. I grafted on the title *Los Tíos del Diablo* for reasons I cannot dissociate from the cultural, perhaps (neo) Baroque dynamics I mentioned earlier. In the end, now, the series is called *Los Coros Menores or Los Tíos del Diablo*. *Los Tíos del Diablo* are dice thrown by everyone and no one at the same time, which produced and continue to produce some remarkable satanic operettas in the Andes. They start from the basis that the Devil is something that corresponds to the parallel construction of language and world in the context of Catholicism. Their worship practice finds a home there, in the Altiplano culture, and is closely related to the cult of the Virgin Mary. The story is a long one, dating back to pre-Columbian times. Before the arrival of the Spanish, the area where the *Diablada* emerged was dominated by the Incas, and before them by the Aymara, and before them, the Pukina, and before them by an ethnic group known as the Urus or Uros—in fact, the word 'Oruro' comes from 'Uro Uro.' An interesting footnote to all this: it is believed that the Aymara have a 'tetralectic' thought system which Bolivian theorist Jorge Emilio Molina places in opposition to Western binary dialectic. In addition to true and false as the basis of a dialectical synthesis, the Aymara posed 'possibly true' and 'possibly false' as definitive states. This is another way of saying that in the 'tetralectic,' that which is 'contingent' can be installed in a radical and definitive manner, and not only as a transitional state between true and false (as we find, for example, in Hegelian dialectics). It therefore includes an uncertainty principle that is constitutive of the world. Little (or maybe not so little) remains of the Urus, the majority of whom adopted the Aymara language but maintained their belief in a deity known as *Tiw* (later associated with the Aymara *Ukupacha*: the underworld of the dead and darkness). The cult of *Tiw* dates back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. and was expressed in an ancestor of the *Diablada* known as the 'Dance of the Llama-Llama,' which the Spanish called the 'Devils'

which comes from the Latin *religare* o *re-legere*, which has a religious connotation.

Dance of Indigenous Miners.’ The indigenous people danced with *Tiw* masks.

We owe a staggering mutation of this tradition to the Augustinian Missionaries: during the colonial exploitation of the silver mines, *Tiw* was hispanicized as ‘*Tío*’ (Uncle), thus becoming ‘*Tío de la Mina*’ —in other words, ‘uncle of the mine,’ in which the Spanish *tío* (uncle) sounds very much like the Pre-Columbian *Tiw*. We have another debt to the Aymara language: the natives could not pronounce the word *Dios* (God); they could only say *Tios*, which ultimately became *Tío* (n.b.: the words *Tios* (uncles) and *Dios* (God) are very close in Spanish pronunciation). The journey from *Tiw* to *Tío* and *Tios* to *Dios* is how *Tiw* became the patron of the mines (for the missionaries), or simply God (for the Aymara). To this day, many highland mines have their own *Tío*. Its incarnation is a clay idol —occasionally painted red— with a huge phallus and a pair of horns. That phallus fertilizes Pachamama (from the Aymara and Quechua *Pacha*, meaning earth and “world,” “cosmos” and *mama*: mother, namely “Mother Earth”).

Furthermore, the *Tío* —lord and master of the *Ukupacha*—reigns under the Earth and can cause landslides, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes but can also procure abundant veins for the miners, inseminated by his magical phallus. So, one would do well to keep *Tío* happy. Typically, offerings are made to him in the form of coca leaves, beer, *aguardiente* (the local moonshine), cigars, streamers, confetti and an incredible weekly drinking spree celebrated in honor of the idol. All of this takes place in full view of the clergy in Bolivia and beyond—John Paul II himself gave the Great Traditional and Authentic *Diablada* of Oruro a Vatican Medal. Beneath the Sanctuary of the Virgen del Socavón, located at the bottom of a mine whose entrance is through a church, there are demons. In *Ukupacha* you can also find the *Anchanchus*, funny little devil children with human faces, pig noses and calf horns (although sometimes they take the form of a friendly old man who offers treasures). The *Anchanchus* are the owners of the mines, and some argue that the *Diablada* descends from the Dance of the *Anchanchu*. And maybe there’s something that the evangelizers failed to notice: that lacking a true hell in the Andean worldview, the Devil was ultimately transformed into a funny and playful being, an odd mixture that recalls

both Hades and, especially, Dionysus. Just look at the *Diablada* masks: there, the devil can even assume the form of a woman (or transvestite): the *Diablaesa China Supay*, who represents temptation, sin and flesh, which includes the lust that is permitted during the carnival. Another role of the Devil is to be a mediator between the living and the Virgin. To invoke rain the people used to pull the dead from their graves. They believed that the dead could mediate between the world of the living and the *Achachilla*, the place where people go after they die. When that ritual was banned, the Virgin was associated with and effectively transformed into *Achachilla* and the dead with the “Devil miners that came from the underground.” Now, it was the Virgin herself who officiated as *Averno* and the *Diablos* as Mercury. But the natives continued digging up corpses. Finally, in 1998, the ritual was replaced by a procession where devils dance around the Mother of God (and who are slowly starting to look more and more like the ‘Samurai’ of Oruro). These and the other run-down warriors, who dance drunk to the sound of Andean winds, fearful of *Tíos* and *Anchanchus*, are the children of the Virgin, but they are also —thanks to the concession of the missions— the inevitable representatives of the *Tíos del Diablo* on the face of the Earth.



Some Bolivian Tío's in the Mines of Oruro and Potosí