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The Power Plant

Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle: Phantom Truck + Always After

By Edward Kanerva



Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's work utilizes sound, film and sculpture to engage viewers in phenomenological experiences that present and problematize sociological issues such as the history of modernity, the effects of globalization and the multiple meanings of the word "climate."

For Manglano-Ovalle "climate" becomes an apt metaphor for our current milieu because of its polysemy; climate can signify both "natural phenomena such as meteorological events, as well as the political climate of geopolitics post 9/11." Moreover, Manglano-Ovalle's works are often characterized by their conflation of a seductive aesthetic form and an underlying malignancy. For example, *Cloud Prototype no. 1* (2003) is a titanium and alloy sculpture that represents one second within the duration of a thunderstorm created at the Department of Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Illinois, where the artist collaborated with scientists to retrieve three-dimensional data from an actual thunderstorm.¹ *Cloud Prototype no. 1*'s polished metallic surface and undulating form attract and engage the viewer on a purely aesthetic level. However, upon further inspection of the title and description of the piece, the viewer is confronted by the realization that this object is the representation of the potentially destructive force of a supercell thunderstorm.

Manglano-Ovalle's work is multi-dimensional and often contains opposites that are not easily resolved. Discussing how his work can be beautiful and ugly, seductive and fearsome, Manglano-Ovalle states that "perhaps what I am interested in is not trying to figure out how objects can contain these two diametrically opposed concepts, but

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how I can create objects that offer up the opportunity for the viewer to grapple with those things at the same time."² He posits that in the presence of his sculptures and films the viewer is unable to produce a "final interpretation;"³ rather the viewer is placed in a state of flux. "I actually want to impose on them [the viewer] an ethical dilemma out of which they liberate themselves. My art is not the vehicle for liberation, my imposition is a question placed onto them that they must grapple with."⁴ The viewer experiences and activates Manglano-Ovalle's sculptural spaces; they are confronted with and become apart of a performance. The process of apprehending a work such as *Cloud Prototype no. 1* extends beyond the visual; the viewer must process the multiple layers of data surrounding the work and reevaluate their perception of it.

Cloud Prototype no. 1 is a part of three bodies of work that loosely refer to the three canticas – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* – of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. *Cloud Prototype no. 1* was the first work produced in this series and was loosely related to *Purgatorio*; the two works on display at *The Power Plant*, *Always After* (*The Glass House*) (2006) and *Phantom Truck* (2007), are related to *Inferno* and *Paradiso* respectively. *Always After* is the last in a series of films by Manglano-Ovalle that analyze the work of architect Mies van der Rohe, who pioneered the steel and glass style of modern architecture. The film documents the ceremonious destruction of van der Rohe's *Crown Hall*, his 1950 school of architecture at the *Illinois Institute of Technology* in *Chicago*, before its renovation in 2005. The building's signature glass windows were destroyed by the architect's grandson with a sledgehammer. Although Manglano-Ovalle captured this spectacular and ritualistic act of destruction, the film does not portray it. Rather, *Always After* focuses on the aftermath: strewn shattered glass and its subsequent cleanup. Filmed on high-speed film and then replayed at regular speed, the anonymous and everyday act of sweeping is made strange; the ritual is reversed. The film's panning close-ups of the shattered glass seduces with its crystalline surfaces, but denies context; this could be a construction site, an accident or the aftermath of something far more sinister.

For documenta 12 in 2007, Manglano-Ovalle produced the *Phantom Truck*, which is being shown for the first time in North America at *The Power Plant*. This piece is appended to the final part of Dante's trilogy *Paradiso*. In Dante's poem, the poet confesses that his experience of paradise is limited by his human eyes. Similarly, Manglano-Ovalle's *Phantom Truck* stresses the visual experience and what can and cannot be known. The *Phantom Truck* is a full-scale reproduction of a truck trailer purported to be a mobile biological weapons lab by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell when he addressed the *United Nations Security Council* in 2003. In his address, Powell used a PowerPoint presentation to display a series of satellite and computer generated images of these mobile weapons laboratories. These images were offered as hard evidence of Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction, and ultimately provided a rationale for the invasion of Iraq. However, no truck was ever found; the impetus for the invasion, the evidence, was found to be a fabrication existing only in the language and imagery of Powell's presentatio

Manglano-Ovalle's truck is a hybrid construction amalgamated from the computer generated renderings and descriptions used by Powell and photos of trucks taken after the invasion. It is presented in a darkened room in which the viewer's eyes must adjust to the darkness. The viewer, like Dante observing the divine and finding his

faculties lacking, becomes hyper-aware of their eyes, their ability or inability to perceive an object in the darkness. As the viewer's eyes adjust, they are presented with a collection of forms enclosed within a cage. These forms recall the smooth perfection of Cloud Prototype no. 1 and the polygonal simplicity of the three-dimensional renderings from Powell's PowerPoint. As Manglano-Ovalle describes, "these forms vary in size and shape, but all are formally reductive, smooth simple shapes that suggest Platonic Forms, minimalist sculpture and containers of some unknown industrial chemical nature." The sculpture's aesthetics are formally elegant and refined, but it also operates as a poetic symbol imbued with a latticework of intertwined meanings and references. Hidden in the dark, the truck confronts a politics that Manglano-Ovalle describes as "a system of camouflage, the creation of the real to address the presentation of the artificial."⁵ With the Phantom Truck, Manglano-Ovalle has made the unreal real; the viewer finds an idealization of that which could not be found because it never existed.

Manglano-Ovalle has expressed that he was inspired to produce bodies of work tangentially related to the Divine Comedy while thinking of Inferno and Virgil's role as guide through the underworld: "I was searching for someone who would be our guide. I thought of Robert Oppenheimer as our Virgil – the destroyer and then the conscience – the idea of an unconscious creator who, having made the horrific, falls."⁶ In Oppenheimer Manglano-Ovalle has found a symbol that, like his work, contains irreconcilable opposites. Virgil, Dante's guide, is mired in Limbo due to the arbitrary misfortune of having been born before Christ. Oppenheimer, however, reflects the "contemporary conscious mired in ethical paralysis" due to an act of his own volition. In Manglano-Ovalle's appropriation of the Divine Comedy the "master poet" has been replaced by the "father of the atomic bomb." Oppenheimer's work signalled the birth of the Atomic Age and the height of modernity, but also devastating force and a dependency on nuclear energy. With Oppenheimer we have both the zenith and nadir of conscience and modernity; we have a guide whose ethics cannot be resolved.

Manglano-Ovalle's sculptures and films are similarly betwixt and between. They challenge the viewer and inspire a sense of unrest or ethical dilemma. The series of works that make up his Divine Comedy are particularly layered with a multiplicity of meaning that reflects our modern cultural morass, our "shadowed forest."⁷ Manglano-Ovalle challenges us to analyze a cultural climate in which a PowerPoint can provide the impetus for war and a truck alleged to produce biological weapons is found to produce hydrogen for weather balloons.