

Jose Dávila. Life a User's Manual
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History of art has always generated its own mythologies. Much in the same way as classic mythologies were transmitted thanks to the proliferation of copies, either subservient to or in transgression of the representation of the respective originals, artists have always found in the works of other artists the motifs and forms to practice citation or appropriation as a means to express singularity in duplication. There is often an equal measure of homage and distance in the critical affinity applied by artists to explicitly assume a formal or conceptual relationship with the work of their peers. While in the past this type of relationship might have been 'filial', in terms of apprenticing a technique or a mode of representation, today it is recognized as a reinvention of the references that can open up new possibilities for the artwork between translation and treason, between memory and utter novelty, between continual history and the history that erupts unexpectedly even when conveying continuity.

In Jose Dávila's oeuvre the equation that the avant-gardes proposed between art and life finds one of its most eloquent contemporary expressions, i.e., art that is made from art as an unexpected way of translating life. In this approach to working with art itself there is an absence of the manifesto or of revolutionary utopianism. The issue is not to carry forth an avant-garde or relaunch it through new forms and concepts. The case is not even to initiate a rupture or propose a paradigm shift. In Jose Dávila's works the awareness of art history leans towards the building of a parallel paradigm in which every reference, every allusion, are the constructive elements of an unforeseen declension of recognizable forms. Citation and appropriation never become a mere duplication. Instead of copies, Dávila's pieces confront us with exercises in translation that are accompanied by their unavoidable, minor treasons. In fact, certain emblematic artworks are 'translated' into new materials and into the unexpected combination of their possibilities, as the recognition of each reference turns into the surprise ensuing from a contamination by the vernacular reflected in the very nature of the materials, in the colour or in the constructive dynamics of each work. Jose Dávila's works bring continuity to the radical critical revision of modernity at stake in the reception of European and American artistic avant-garde references in other geographical and cultural latitudes. In a very unique way, they are examples of the 'cultural anthropophagy' declared by Oswald de Andrade in his 1928 'Anthropophagite Manifesto': 'The only things that interest me are those that are not mine. Law of man. Law of the anthropophagite'. This had to do

with a cultural devouring of references from cultural models that were dominant at the centres of a world that was still shaped by colonial or post-colonial legacies so as to reinsert them back into international circulation, rife as it already was with other models and references.

In these works, a critical mannerism rises through the cracks of similitude and dissimilitude, as well as in the references that make up the orbit of a system that differs from the original constellation. Jose Dávila's oeuvre stand out as particularly autonomous in the context of a second generation of artists who were the protagonists of a post-modern attitude vis-à-vis the pioneering attitudes that they revisited in their work. Before them, the last artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century had, in the 1960s and 70s, revealed an initial post-modern attitude by establishing a dialogue and a confrontation, in the languages of minimalism, pop art and conceptual art, with the earlier artistic avant-gardes of a neo-Dadaist, constructivist or Duchampian inspiration. However, these were still steeped in a sense of rupture that reinforced the notion that their work annihilated all previous art, much in the same way as the artists of the first modernisms had felt. Art reached closer to life precisely to reveal how life was more interesting than art, as French artist Robert Filliou expressed. At the time, the notion of art for art's sake was not the major concern. As we can read in one of Robert Frank's works, 'Me and My Brother' (1969), 'don't make a movie about making a movie. Make it'. This would no longer be the case of a generation of artists who, from the 1980s onwards, fell in line with the integration of the art market into an increasingly globalized economy in the context of a first neo-liberal wave and the worldwide globalization following the end of the Cold War as a new brand of planetary capitalism emerged. Much like cinema tends to cite more and more its own history, these artists belong to a generation seeking to relate to the intersection of successive references, images and exhibitions by artists who had been the main protagonists in the whole context of minimalism and post-minimalism. Art seemed to be increasingly a sort of user's manual, opening itself up to new possibilities of formal and conceptual reinvention based on the intersection of references from other artworks, mosaics of knowledge intersecting via the information circulating in art schools, museums, art centres and biennales, which increasingly brought into contact artists hailing from multiple geographical contexts.

The relationship with space and architecture, as manifest in the realm of materials originating from everyday life, is a crucial factor in the exercising of citation in the works of Jose Dávila, Josef Albers, Sol Lewitt or Donald Judd, having been explicitly 'translated' by the artists into spatial exercises that conjugate the present in terms of a transfiguration of the place in which they are shown. Albers' *Homage to the Square*, for instance, is no

longer an equation of colour circumscribed to the objectual condition of the painting, but a spatial construction as, in Dávila's series from 2010 to 2012, the square is defined by a monochrome vinyl installed on a wall onto which several square glass plates lean that bestow upon it new properties of transparency, opacity and reflection. The square had already been questioned by the artist in an earlier piece, *Dwelling Development* (2000), when the spatial arrangement of a square on the ground articulated a possible reference to Carl Andre's works with the irruption of an allusion to the massive growth of the contemporary city recognizable in the 90 ceramic pieces that compose a square of a different order in the exhibition space. In other instances, the vertical arrangement of elements on a wall that is typical of Donald Judd's classic works was subverted by its mimetic replica made of cardboard packs or bits of wood, such as in Dávila's work *Untitled* (2007).

In a set of drawings and photographs started in 2007, *Exercises of the Possible*, Dávila exemplifies this relationship of his work to the imponderable: in all of them tools for drawing or painting, such as brushes or markers, are suspended from an helium balloon to leave their marks on a sheet of paper. This appropriation of the paradigm of the painting device, explored by numerous artists (such as Jean Tinguely...) ever since Raymond Roussel's description of the bizarre painting machine in *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910), is presented by Jose Dávila so as to depict randomness as an expression of the greatest simplicity: the inscription of the marks left by suspension through a device in which ingenuity and art intersect, as they have ever did since humankind confronted the experience of gravity as a grammar of the new forms of inscription in the world they inhabit, from Leonardo's machines to the outer space adventures of our time.

In these works art is always revealed as a mode of acting and reacting, as life always is. Like life, art will always be an exercise of the possible, as Jose Dávila's oeuvre ceaselessly demonstrates.



FIG. 41.—Deer drawn with strokes of black paint varying in width. It is of a primitive style but no longer in absolute profile.

To face p. 214 and Fig. 148

**Jose Dávila —
— Daylight
Found Me
with No Answer**



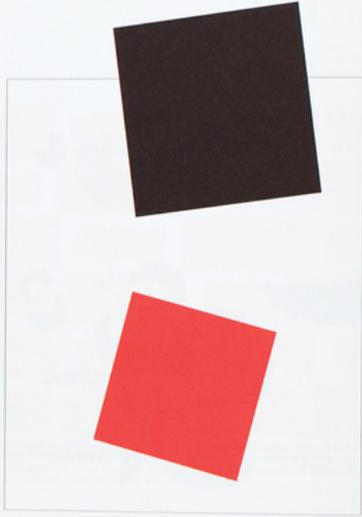


FIG. 64.—Elton and other animals drawn with black pigment on the side of a cave at Niaux (Ariège). They are very well preserved, being half a mile from the entrance and not exposed to air currents. An arrow is painted on the body of the upper lion, and three are to be seen on the body of the lower one. Size of the largest, about six feet.

To face p. 95

Jose Dávila — — Daylight Found Me with No Answer

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