A SUSPENDED CONNECTION

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In 1997, Jose Dávila hung an orange wire in the stairwell of the tallest building in Guadalajara, Mexico. Extensión was the name of the piece, and it was just that: a long, heavy-duty electrical extension cord used in construction, a cable with a male end, which receives the power, and a female end, ready for transmission.

The cable hung from the roof of the building and descended twenty-one floors to the ground. Not being connected and so not fulfilling its function of conducting electricity, this cable, which related the bottom and the top (with all the associations that these words may have: heaven and hell, before and after, social and gender hierarchies, etc.), channeled something else: our gaze along that great architectural block. Extensión invited us to take a tour with our eyes and with our heads from the floor to the ceiling, and made the viewer size up the magnitude of the building they were in, while creating an expectation of what could be found at the end of the tour, when they reached the last of its twenty-one floors.

With this piece, Dávila also created a semantic trick, a kind of joke that he intended to look like a serious thing. The suspended cable from roof to floor connected the spaces, and all the places along its route became a means of transport, one that led both gaze and bodies from one point to another, from a gesture as simple as suspending an element and attributing to it the function that its own name proposed.

Extensión was one of the first pieces that Dávila, a student architect, made in his career as an artist. Now, looking back at it, I find it fascinating to discover that many of the elements that intersect his practice on a conceptual, material, and aesthetic level were already there at the outset.
One of my favorite exercises as a curator is to find in the fragility and boldness of artists' early pieces that which will become the backbone of their practice. This is achieved with an analytical eye that directs all its intuition towards an emerging career, or after long years of following the work of an artist, accompanying his production (which in the case of Jose Dávila has not had a break) and looking as we are not supposed to look: from front to back.

This is something that Dávila does very well: inverting the natural order of time, materials, and expectations about his work which, curiously, is always a retrospective exercise – of nostalgia, but also of discovery and new astonishment. (It is no coincidence that his work is full of memory games.) The research that Dávila began in the 1990s was not completely "derivative" or referential, but comprised, rather, literal linguistic games such as Extensión, games that followed the conceptual tradition inaugurated by Joseph Kosuth. The artist placed the thing in place of the word, and vice versa.

Showing a special interest in architecture, his early works, besides interconnecting the notions of space, material, or language, also contained elements that could even be interpreted as gestures of institutional critique. How was this accomplished? Many of Dávila's works could be seen as ready-mades, but they were actually much more than that. In his work, it is important not only to aestheticize a tool or material. The objects he places as sculptures are rather, following George Perec, spaces in themselves: packaging? containers? auxiliary objects? wrapping? I am not sure, and I propose these categories as a question, because they could be all that and still remain undefined—just like the words, which will never end up usurping the thing.

In terms of language, his works are not only physically but also semantically suspended. I think of one of his most iconic exercises, Untitled, from 2005. This is a sculpture in which the spaces between the rungs of a folding ladder are filled with inflatable balloons. The piece speaks to us of the voids that are "filled" with the aerial emptiness of the balloon, pointing out, also, the volatility of the objects that fill the spaces of the art system. If it were a figure of speech, we would be facing a sort of oxymoron, where the balloon, fragile in appearance and normally acceding to the force of gravity, emerges strong enough to work in the opposite direction, towards what oppresses it, seeking to rise instead of falling. This type of work is referred to by the artist as "poetic moments proposed to seemingly very technical solutions."52 Representations of contradiction in which fragility and resistance, tranquility and tension, precision and chance, the industrial and the natural, poetry and its negation coexist, Dávila's pieces assemble and disassemble from the beginning. They exist as works of art as long as they are exhibited and return to their condition of multiple and usable objects once they have been "disarticulated."

In Untitled (2002), Dávila placed a rolled pasteboard in a wooden chair, where there should be a woven bejuco seat. The classic image of a broken wooden chair waiting to be repaired by the man who weaves bejuco became a sculpture the moment Dávila introduced into the empty space that rolled pasteboard, which according to the laws of entropy tried to unroll, but which the ring of the seat gently embraced, containing or imprisoning it. The gesture was not innocent; Dávila knew well the pieces of Bruce Nauman's A Cast of the Space Under My Chair (1965–68) and South America Circle (1981); Rachel Whiteread's Untitled (One Hundred Spaces) (1995), a piece made of one hundred resin cubes modeled from the empty space of one hundred chairs; and One and Tree Chairs (1965), by Joseph Kosuth, or Duchamp and his bench mounted with a bicycle wheel (1913/1951), and he joined this dialogue between works and their artistic questions. Dávila not only puts in dialogue the materials of the piece—chair and pasteboard—in the purest surrealist style, but also introduces with it a debate on the history of contemporary art in the same subtle way in which he inserted the pasteboard in that empty space.

The artist knows how to study spaces, negotiate them, break them down. What distinguishes Dávila's early work, more than grand gestures, are soft but vigorous gestures that use everyday objects to converse with space and with our aesthetic references.

I said that some of these early works could be read as attempts at institutional critique, in that they make evident the spaces and dynamics that "contain" or are put "in tension" in the contemporary art system, in the manner of early Minimalism. I am thinking, for example, of the way in which Dávila uses aluminum in Wall Games (2004), a work in which a black aluminum frame reflects the wall in the white cube of the gallery. The frame is separated from its content by something like a meter, generating a black line that becomes a drawing of the space itself. It is a kind of tautology, like those constructed by Mel Bochner, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, or Sol Lewitt, who throughout the 1960s and 1970s generated works that gave a new and unique perspective to the architectural components of the exhibition or gallery space.

I would like to salvage the reference to Mel Bochner's work. Regarding his series made with cardboard (a material also frequently used by Dávila) attached to the walls of the gallery, the American artist says:

the brown paper began as just a convenience, something that was always at the studio. It came in sizes, 3 feet by 4 feet, which are the standard measurements of most building materials. I slowly came to realize that these measurements are so deeply embedded in our experience that they regulate our perception, yet remain completely invisible.53
The standard size of the sheet of paper, Bochner suggests, at once reflects and reproduces the standardized scale of modern architecture and its furnishings (of endless interest to Le Corbussier, Mies Van de Rohe, and to Dávila).

Along the same lines, in All or Nothing (2002) Dávila again "draws" the contour of one of the walls of the exhibition space, this time with neon lights that, contrary to Dan Flavin's style, are not arranged to create a defined sculptural work, but a piece that takes the shape of the existing space. The work reveals the space that contains it.

In this case, we can talk about derivative works and not just referential ones. Although Dávila makes the outline of the wall evident, in the manner of Bochner, we know very well that his work is not precisely a wall or the gallery space itself. He follows Magritte: ceci n'est pas un mur. Here I would like to return to the language games present in the trajectory of this tapatío artist since his very early production. In the Minimalist way, we could speak of an honest will in the use of materials: here, suddenly, as in the work of the Belgian surrealist, the stones, the apples, the balloons, the threads that go from one object to another take on multiple other meanings. Once again, it is a kind of suspension, not only of objects in the air but of concepts in time. This is how Dávila puts objects in tension and suspension The challenge of the physics that drops or, rather, makes the suspense float. I think of the way in which, in certain works by Magritte, objects "cover" something: an apple hides a man's face, which in turn hides the sky and its clouds.. Something is positioned over something else and does not let us see what is hidden, because discovering it could reveal an intriguing secret. No one knows what is hidden in these paintings, not even behind the words. We guess, but we will always fail to figure it out: thus is language itself, with its benefits and curses. It is a riddle that holds possibilities of terror and relief.

Returning to the orange cable suspended from the ceiling of that towering building, I think it is spellbinding that all of Dávila's work was already "contained" in a certain way in that first piece. I feel fortunate to have followed his production closely, to walk beside him along a path marked by a thread of energy that works by always looking back. Dávila is someone for whom the new is nothing but light that illuminates the original, and vice versa.

I am also happy to be able to close this text with the certainty that this is not an end. I have one last play on words: a question that reflects our times and broadens the possibilities of reading Dávila's work. Where did the route of that orange extension cable really begin – on the male side (which receives the electricity) or the female (which passes electricity through it)? Perhaps knowing this is not important. We are simply grateful that even from the extremes, we are together shaping the space of our journey.