



RUBÉN BALDEMAR

*The implosion of the viral urinal**

[La implosión del mingitorio viral]

By Mauro Guzmán & Nancy Rojas

In a catalog from 1991, published for the exhibition *Papeles protagónicos*¹, Baldemar discussed ideas, about the difficulty in finding the exact point at which their outbursts occur, as if they were a virus imploding to stay, to dissolve into the paradoxes of the world. Coincidentally, at present, his world is presented to us as a stream of paradoxical images in a subterranean, dormant state, imposing itself and demanding new appraisals and specific scripts that may allow his oeuvre to be approached differently.

Baldemar studied Fine Arts, dabbled in architecture and took classes with Mele Bruniard in 1980 and with Julián Usandizaga in 1983. His work started circulating in 1984, joining and taking part in the wave fueled by the democratic opening of Argentina. This context was propitious for his work, marked not only by a determination to create with finesse (which ran counter to the increasingly dominant tendency in that decade that “it was not necessary to do art well”) but also by the anachronistic, vestigial way in which he set up the narrative of his images so that they were amalgamated, in some instances, into a trash version of the rising estheticism at the time. Nevertheless, he did not recognize this as trash style, rather as kitsch, which was a major trend at the time.

The first point in this attempt at articulating a distinctive approach to Baldemar leads us to visualize the escapes he himself foretold by self-isolating from his environment. But in the context of a culture which escapes to multiple spaces, real, fictional, ghostly, relational; that ten-year long self-isolation is not only meaningful in emotional terms but also in circumstantial and political terms above all. That is why it is necessary to talk about that self-isolation as a conscious choice, which was part of a critical and discursive corpus that caused him to operate away from the game of supply and demand of the gallery and exhibition circuit for an extended time. We can see this isolation as a powerful gesture, not merely a romantic exercise. As modelling energy for the escapes he fostered towards essential procedures that today allow us to see the patriarchal genealogy of modern art historiography and also the artist as being part of a movement of queer ethics and esthetics.

In 1983, the American Art Journal archive disclosed a letter from Duchamp to his sister Suzanne, which said: “One of my female friends, under the pseudonym Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture.” In spite of how radical this revelation was, it was not until 1996 that various investigations contributed more and more evidence to prove that the famous urinal is a piece by the Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven. A Dadaist artist, author of objects, performances and porno-phonetical poetry, who for some time was neighbors with Duchamp in New York. Of course, these studies did not gain institutional recognition until 2014, when curators Julian Spalding and Glyn Thompson presented this conclusion in the context of the exhibition *A Lady’s Not a Gent’s*: the so-called father of conceptualism not only appropriated said object (he coincidentally patented it after 1950, when both Elsa and photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who took pictures of the piece for the second edition of the magazine *The Blind Man*, published in 1917, were already dead) but also robbed it of its original meaning.²

As an abomination, an avant-garde reference, an apocryphal work and, beginning a few years ago, also as an “invisible intervention of a female artist”³, the urinal exploded and went viral in contemporary art from different perspectives. *La hazaña de Mutt* is the name Baldemar gave to his own urinals around 2001. The work features a series made up of small urinals and a wall relief, which he originally conceived of as one central idea—the urinal and its “evolution into Duchamp’s fountain.”

We suppose Baldemar did not know about the existence of the baroness Elsa, but nevertheless the title of this project reveals a critical eye, also visible in the short statement he wrote himself about these pieces:

“The individual names of the sculptures reinforce the central idea (...) with issues revolving around sexism, confrontation, the recognition of esthetic referents and a certain marginality—already an urban legend—surrounding public baths.”⁴

To some extent, these words allow us to glimpse the premonitory and ghostly existence of that revealing sentence several years later in feminist discourses and contemporary art. Moreover, this set of pieces and the words Baldemar uses to present them in a completely new light drag the figure of the urinal into another hazy world, more nocturnal, anchored in the conception of the public bathroom in which masculine urine is associated with filth and sexual desire. And in this sense, the image of the public bathroom becomes an essential link to the many procedures of gender surveillance. An idea developed in 2006 by philosopher Paul B. Preciado in his text “Basura y género. Mear / cagar. Masculino / femenino”. We may read his article as if it were a reading of this series by Baldemar:

“Pinned to the wall, at a height of 80 or 90 centimeters from the ground, one or multiple urinals are grouped together in a space, often intended for sinks, and accessible to the public eye. Within this space, one closed piece, separated categorically from the public view by a door with a latch, gives access to a large toilet similar to those furnishing the ladies’ bathrooms. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the only common architectural law in the construction of bathrooms for men is the separation of functions: peeing-standing-up-urinal/shitting-sitting-down-toilet. In other words, the effective production of heterosexual masculinity depends upon the imperative separation of genitality and anality.”

Although today they appear to be perfectly designed small replicas, these urinals are different from other works made in the late eighties and during the nineties, such as *Caleidoscopios*, *La maja plegadiza*, *Tríptico de las cometas ligeramente barrocas*, *Judith y Holofernes* or *Suite de la secesión*, to mention a few. In those works, color, monumental scale and techniques associated with virtuous painting (such as patina) are higher in the hierarchy. At the same time, and with the idea of generating relational and

more versatile and depraved readings on his work, a visible link between urinals and his series *Heráldica*, created in 2004 can be seen. The symbolic is highly relevant in both of them, but in a strictly concrete way, where the artist prefers to appeal to extreme synthesis rather than to the polymorphic and anachronic baroque to create his own conceptual blueprint. Coats of arms are featured in both series. In *Heráldica* he incorporates, among others, the Argentine coat of arms, while in *La hazaña de Mutt* he incorporates the urinal. An *objet trouvé* of scatological semantics that history and the international art market have considered as the ultimate emblem of modern art. In both groups, and in each of the paintings and objects that comprise them, these insignia appear reproduced infinitely, transfigured or even vandalized, showing different variations of the existing complexity in this type of temporal ellipsis that his production generated during the early 2000’s. It is in this moment, just prior to his death in 2005, that the keys emerge to read Rubén Baldemar’s baroque intentions and his dedication to confinement as being muddy neo-Baroque affections from Río de la Plata, which sunk him and at the same time elevated him in the contemporary art urinal.

*Translation by Fabrizio Arias Lippo

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NOTA

This text is part of the different activities taking part within Proyecto Baldemar, promoted since 2019 by a dedicated team. The project intends not only to research Rubén Baldemar's oeuvre from a perspective concerning historiography, conservation and recovery, but also to approach his work from an esthetic and discursive view. A view forged in the light of present cultural parameters, considering Rubén Baldemar as an essential figure of contemporary Argentine art.

Staff proyecto Baldemar 2021

Archive, conservation and restoration:

Norma Rojas

Commercial management and executive production:

Daniel Andrino, Daniel Pagano & Paulina Scheitlin (Subsuelo gallery, Rosario)

Curatorial and research contents management:

Nancy Rojas

Photographic record and communication:

Paulina Scheitlin

Cámara#3

Requiem. Rubén Baldemar

Editor Joaquín Rodríguez

February—April 2021

www.barro.cc