

THE UNBEATABLE FUNAMBULIST

A Contribution to the comedy of Tahiche Díaz

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Dante Alighieri represented Hell as a huge chasm shaped like an inverted cone, where the condemned suffer in nine concentric circles according with the severity of their sins, which was judged by how premeditated their actions were. The first circle was Limbo; there were the pagans who lived as just men or those who died without being baptized. In the following circles were the vicious, who sinned because they were unable to restrain their instincts. Down below were those who committed violent acts led by outbursts of passion or wrath. And, finally, in the lower circles, were those who sinned knowingly, through acts of conscious will: in the eighth circle were the thieves, swindlers, forgers, hypocrites, flatters, witches, astrologers, fortune tellers and corrupt politicians; and, in the ninth, were the traitors. Right down at the centre of hell was the supreme traitor, the Fallen Angel, Satan, the origin of evil.

In the *Divine Comedy*, virtue is associated with faith and evil with reason and consciousness in a clearly hierarchical manner. Since the *Book of Genesis* was written, the serpent has embodied evil because it craved knowledge and, thus, abandoned faith. This is why Dante places it at the centre of Hell, on the furthest place from the light. Dante was an intelligent man; we have no reason to doubt his perspicacity. That's why I think Tahiche Díaz, as a man who wants to learn, who incessantly messes with the foliage of the tree of art, science and knowledge, is, without a doubt, in Hell. His body of works, which is dense, polyhedral, elusive, bold and vulnerable at the same time, irritating and admirable even, has seemed to me, these past months, like a babel of uncertain meanings and connections, a just punishment for the arrogance and sins of those who think know art. And from the circle I've been writing in for more than a year since I started this infernal text, I can only begging by thanking the author for allowing me to accompany him on his adventure.

8th November 2014

For more than ten years, Tahiche Díaz has been working in Bajamar, a small town in northern Tenerife that is sandwiched between the wild coastline of a beautiful and fierce sea and the tremendous walls of the west mountains of the rocky massif of Anaga. Located in the basement of a villa built in the seventies, the artist's living space and studio form an underground apartment of a hundred squares meters, nice temperature and monastic light, that can be accessed from a sunny garden by going down a stairway. When I entered its rooms, which were filled with the artist's works [except for one in which a bed and a closet barely fitted], the first thing it hit me was the high contrast between the messy ambience of the studio and the gloominess of the neighbourhood where it was located. Descending into the domains of this unpredictable sculptor made me think about wonder caves of oriental tales, crowded tombs inhabited by pharaohs, the famous catacombs under the splendour of Rome and [why not] the well known cavern of Plato. Then, for a moment, I thought I had figured out the artist's past interest in playing with shapes and shadows, the «soul houses» of the ancients, the cave paintings from the Palaeolithic and the Cabinets of curiosities from the 18th century, in which the taxonomies of an until then unknown world were tested.

I was in the workroom of a restless and curious artist, who was also feverish and baroque, quick and prolific. Everywhere, cluttering the corners, I could almost say oozing from the walls, was a *pandemonium* of things: finished works, half done pieces, paper and clay sketches, remains of various work processes; sculptures, little sculptures, paperweights and miniatures, reproductions, models and found objects, notebooks and drawing books, parts of broken pieces; drawings, paintings and murals, fetishes and dissected insects, landscapes and self-portraits, sample tests, projects, witticisms and absurdities, modules and moulds, dolls, abstractions and mechanisms; three dozen dummies of terracotta, a fish tank filled with sculptures, some papier-mâché *cabezudos*¹, a cardboard dinosaur that transformed into a thermal power plant and, finally, on the furthest place from the light, a character without hands that resembled Pope Benedict XVI.

It really was a descent into the underworld understood as the abandonment of reality's order to enter a space without coherence; I don't mean it was ruled by delirium, but there was a kind of suspension of order similar to that

¹ **Translator's note:** roughly 'Big-Heads'; they are costume figures made for traditional Spanish festivals whose main feature is an oversized head that gives them a comical appearance.

transitional moment between sleep and wakefulness when we are still aware of dreaming about something that seems completely real.

Those who are wise say a good coffee, at the right time, can calm an agitated mind. We looked for a place on the sofa to sit down and we drank it through a good talk, as Gabriel García Márquez liked it. Tahiche explained to me the project for his exhibition, which was going to be articulated as an expedition to space; a kind of visual narrative halfway between science fiction, fantasy illustration, esoteric literature and travel writing. The artist's goals included creating sculptures and installations that would evoke the samples collected at an imaginary planet as well as other works that would simulate stories or epic poems, along with documentation about his work process, detours, statements and various digressions. This was a heterogeneous and disjointed body of works presented as a large diorama or a kind of museum *raisonné* based on the catalogue of the artist's interests: his fascination for science as rhetorical material, his conception of the artistic project as a journey, his attention to mechanisms and engineering, his resort to the discursive value of handcrafting skills, his vocation to connect art and politics and, above all, his intention to create loquacious sculptures that are capable of echoing all of this.

The text he used to present the exhibition simulated a science fiction fragment that worked as a movie trailer:

«Excursionist number 45454573—H returns home from his mission of 1460 days to search for potential paradises. But the journey always changes the traveller; communication is no longer easy: information is fragmented and the astronaut is forgetful. His testimony tries to reconstruct what happened, gathers proof of it and displays it into the following sections: Investigations, Reports, Graphic material, Memories, Dreams and writings».

The Project was presented, in a surprisingly direct way, as a fiction narrative based on an intelligible story that, apparently [and only apparently], could be considered coherent and leading to a conclusion. This structure was already present in the artist's recent exhibitions. In «Diario de Rimas y Muecas»(2009) ('Diary of Rimes and Grins') he conceived his works as paths coming from and going to Literature, where the narrative component overpowered, almost always, the formal structure of the pieces and even the Art History references that he liked to mix in them. Here, however, the narrative was clearer and whole, showing the artistic process as a journey and the sculptures as samples collected from an exploration site or chronicles of the journey experiences.

The Colombian coffee was mild, easy to drink. But his project seemed risky. I think all the narrative elements he proposed threatened to make his body of works look like illustrations of some ideas, and there are certainly few words

more adverse to Contemporary Art than «illustrative». Since Manet, this adjective has been synonymous with «old» or even with «un-pictorial»; Since Greemberg this kind of work has a name true modern artists [and most of postmodern artists] have avoided like the plague: kitsch.

This perspective makes us acknowledge that Tahiche Díaz' sins are certainly terrible because his works are of a narrative nature and consciously descriptive on two different levels: the way to resolve individual pieces, which he conceived as sculptural groups of interacting figures that create a scene similar to a snapshot and tell a story; but especially [and this may be more shocking] the project as a whole, which is articulated around the astronaut's tale.

With the caution this situations call for, I warned the artist about the dangers of his journey, but Tahiche was really passionate about his work. Unstoppable and vivacious as he was, he gutted with devilish detail the insides of the project: building on the idea of the artistic process as an expedition he played with the rhetoric of science and museums, disguised the discourse as a narrative and conceived sculpture as a barricade. They are almost all recent works, some are previous, and many are in progress or are part of an ongoing project. Some pieces are abstract, others are illustrative and others are allegoric in various ways. There are ceramics, installations, photographs, bronze sculptures, collages, drawings and projections; floor sculptures, wall sculptures and exempt sculptures; pieces that move, illuminate or whistle; single works, series, collections, samples and sketchbooks. And, in the background or the underground, Surrealism, Botany, Carnival, Taxonomy, some unacknowledged eroticism, Bosch, the mind in the cave of Lewis-Williams, the space odyssey of Kubrick, the circus, parades and marches. All this clearly seemed like a small garden of earthly delights: the divine comedy of Tahiche Díaz.

I looked around the kitchen, searching for two laurel crowns.

12th March 2015

We agreed to meet at noon on a Friday, just in time for lunch. The project had progressed and now it was a matter of resolving issues regarding the exhibition and its text. It was a windy day; the refreshing ocean breeze blew through town, though, in fact, was barely noticeable inside the studio. We drank a thankful wine and ate a very honest salad along with a dish I can't remember right now. But I do recall the agile way in which Tahiche jumped over the living room sofa to bring some napkins to the table.

Agility is an interesting quality in an artist. Culture can be burdensome, and we can deem admirable the way a work of art envelops its complexity in a light, fluid and effortless form. The way a jump can overcome the obstacle with a necessary, elegant, eloquent and easy movement. The purpose of all pirouettes is deceiving gravity, but this has to be done with respect because artists, like acrobats, instinctively know that their actions don't eliminate the problem, only bypass it. However, their job is to jump. And we must acknowledge that sometimes that brief moment when the body is weightless and one might say that anything can happen makes it all worth it.

Thereupon it occurs to me that Tahiche is a hare: restless, astute, curious and light, elegant and nervous, which conquers territories with his velocity. Although he quickly contradicts my argument: he sees himself more as an elephant, which is known as the only animal that can't jump.

Elephants, he explains, have powerful legs, like heavy columns that sit firmly on the ground and keep them in touch with the order of matter as a principle of reality. But, at the same time, the limbs of these animals are sensitive receptors capable of perceiving low frequency sounds emitted by other elephants from a very long distance. This mix of power and delicacy; this capacity to perceive solid and invisible things, like a sensitive monster or subtle steamroller would, makes the elephant, in the eyes of Tahiche Díaz, a passionate animal.

The interest of the artist in these mammals doesn't come up in our conversation by chance. Tahiche had just completed one of the central pieces of the exhibition, «Infrasonidos del lamento» ('Infrasounds of lament'), a group of sculptures depicting two female elephants dragging the body of a dead male, which is mounted on a structure that looks like a palanquin for its own transportation.

This image was inspired by a documentary about a village of elephant tamers. This town is located at the banks of a river and occupies a territory inhabited by herds of wild elephants, which the local people worship for having essential strength and tame to become work forces. To them, these animals represent the ancient duality of human being's relationship with an equally benign and destructive Nature; with its immense vital and transforming power.

The documentary narrates the adventures of a domesticated elephant that, taken by instinct, escaped from the village and went into the forest following a river's route. There it found a wild male and they fought for the territory. But a pack animal is a weak rival to a beast whose ferocity hasn't been strained by tamers, so the fight ends up when the docile animal dies in a backwater of the river.

It was vital for the villagers to remove the body as it could poison the water, so they tied it to two females to drag it ashore. This was no easy task; the body was huge, the road was tortuous and the effort of the female elephants made up an intense image that, through the eyes of the artist, shows some powerful references: the female sphere preventing the corpse of failed masculinity from contaminating the water that feeds society; the mausoleum of virility struck down by its own decay; the strenuous effort of femininity, which carries the burden of the remains of masculinity turned into something pathetic; Or, perhaps, in general terms, the strength of meekness bringing back the instinct for freedom to a territory of social control.

At first, this work can be seen as a simple illustration of an intense story with deep psychological meaning. However, it has many disturbing undertones. It's a kind of strange monument presented on a device to carry it around, like a *Paso*² of a religious procession, the gadgetry of a demonstration or the intricate coffin for a funeral cortege. Its elements are unclear but it seems they tie two key dimensions of Tahíche Díaz' work together: the projection of the metaphor of private life onto society [the posthumous tribute to the failed act of rebellion, the monument to the memories of those who refused to observe the provisions] and the allusions to furtive contents that seem to anchor on looks or perceptions of personal nature [diffuse references to the intricate relationship between the masculinity and femininity spheres]. At the same time, this sculpture brings together two vectors that, from another perspective, are interesting to the artist: on the one hand, a powerful image anchored in the materials and the voracious babble of technical detailing and, on the other, a refined sensitivity that is evident in the nuances of an intense and subtle speech.

There was some wine left. I asked Tahiche if there was a sexual component in his works. He answered that sex was indirectly related to his works because it wasn't so much present in the images depicted as in his relationship with clay, in the sensuality of the game of dominance and submission played by the artist with his materials when intellect and premeditation are overcome by touch and intuition. Of course, this private relationship with clay is projected onto his discourse; not so much in the narrative pieces as in the more abstract ones, which are the direct result of a conscious interaction with the materials, of doing with clay what the material itself induces you to do with it.

Living the artistic process as a somehow transcendent experience is an important factor for the project. On the one hand it's an invisible link between the narrative and the abstract pieces, two lines of work that at first

² **Translator's note:** a *Paso* is an elaborate float that depicts an episode of the Passion of Christ and is carried by porters in a religious procession.

glance might seem parallel, unconnected. And, on the other, it's the foundation of the artistic process' concept as a journey; in fact, it's why self-portraits are constantly present in the artist's imaginary: in the author's statues, which seem to be reference points or guides to the exhibition as they frequently have cameo roles in his most theatrical pieces and everywhere else, embedding themselves into the visual metaphors: in the identification of the elephant with a kind of personal and animistic «totem», and in some other images of his work.

It would be obvious to state that the forgetful astronaut is a transfiguration of the artist whose works are presented as the adventures of an expedition, but it may not be so to say that his concept of travelling is not restricted to depicting the more or less significant details of a knowledge process carried out through art and actually focuses on the vital path of a person that faces life as if it were an expedition. In this regard, the astronaut doll we find here and there among the figures that make up his exuberant iconography can be seen as the image of anyone who is attending the show, of their own psychological universe, of their personal hell.

24th April, 2015

Tahiche Díaz staged his exhibition like a three act play where the pieces were placed in eight rooms according to the chronology of the forgetful astronaut's story. In the first room, visitors are greeted by a sculpture depicting a smiling baby whose hands are a spoon and a fork. It's the «Riente del pan» ('Laughy of bread'), a grotesque figure reminiscent of the disturbing delusions of Bosch, and also an authentic statement from the artist: mankind represented as a child waiting to be fed, a joyful little angel hungry for knowledge. This sculpture opens a room dedicated to shed light on the dialectics of intellect and instinct, along with two pieces that refer to the library as a [problematic] thought engine and two others that evoke, in a different way, telluric elements [as a problem]: some fake rocks [built with iron plates] and a ceramic polyptych that seems to be there to speak of the ancient symbology of clay, which, since *The Book of Genesis*, has been the essential matter for creation and representation. If books are conceptual and symbolic constructions, the most obvious graphic representation of thought, then clay is related to the spheres of matter and body. The astronaut *madelman*³, an image of the author himself, completes the scene. Therefore

³ **Translator's note:** action figure produced by Spanish toy company «Industrias Plásticas Madel».

the main themes of the artist's discourse are conveniently displayed in this room.

From there, the paths of this garden like exhibition fork. In the four rooms on the left we find a swarm of material experiments, entitled «Sonidos del paraíso» [sounds of paradise], that fit in the narrative as the samples collected by the astronaut during his expedition. They are display like a science museum collection, with an eye to Cabinets of curiosities, although this layout isn't aimed at creating a convincing fictional illustration but alluding to taxonomic order as a concept that is essential to understand the universe, like a word generator we use to define things.

This installation includes objects of different types and sizes, almost all ceramic, that present two deliberately irritating sculptural propositions: one is continuously reminiscent of visceral, voluptuous, botanic and zoomorphic elements that create a kind of organic orgy; the other shows, here and there, tin-glazed ceramic and bright colours like those of the most deplorable tradition of commercial ceramics. Between one another, the finish of the pieces is devilishly kitsch, halfway between the worst Lladró and the worst Jeff Koons. But Tahiche's depravity is even greater, if possible: not only has he made paperweights, doorstops, lamps and absurd utensils reminiscent of fantasy biology, erotic geology, debauched and baroque flora and exotic tripe shops, he takes his pieces for a walk: he takes them to the beach, bathes them, makes them sing, like they really were organisms. Like holothurians that became pets.

But this is all part of a little circus. Tahiche is the funambulist that makes a pirouette inside another pirouette. Through the forms hubbub of the samples from a strange planet he creates a Garden of delights that is really another screen [another grin of the comedian, another jump of the funambulist] for the problem of the primitive relation with matter as an essential element for experiencing knowledge.

In fact, the display of allusions to form is nothing more than a game; the more accurate source of these works would be jazz because they are, first of all, improvisations, exercises for dialoguing with clay until it's shaped. These works are like meditations, a kind of study of the material's fluidity; the author deliberately positions himself on the limits of knowledge, in a dark area between what he knows and what he ignores, between his will and fortuity, between his intellect and his instinct. Therefore, organic reminiscences are a way to highlight matter as the originator of the artistic experience. It's like he wanted to see forms in their first stage; forms that, as Dante's mildest sins, are for now just the result of unrestraint and frenzy.

Premeditated pieces are placed in the three rooms on the right. In the first one, visitors encounter the powerful sculpture of the elephants, shaped as a device to haul that seems to mark the start of a parade of the artist's obsessions, as it was stating a will to take the inside demons to the streets and move private discourse to public sphere.

However, the key work of this transformation is «Barritada» ('Trumpets')⁴, a bizarre sculpture of a wall built with bricks shaped as elephant heads. Here the artist's mischief comes from a minimalistic structure to which he has not only added trumpets and horns but literary references [the walls of the catacombs, the walls built with the skulls of the defeated, the myth of the graveyard of elephants]. And in doing so he creates a sculpture that attempts to be a parapet, a barricade or structure for insurrection made with the pieces of private symbols.

The artist's interest in expressing symbolically the rebellion against submitting the particular to the general, individual instinct to common sense, the exception to the norm, crystallizes in this work. Tension between private passions and social regulations is perfectly reflected, for Tahiche Díaz, on the images of ceremonies and parade rituals: processions, Carnival, funerals, manifestations; in which, one way or the other, individual expressions are grouped into a collective «artistic» form. This is why in his more reasoned works [the ones that have a more deliberate meaning and, therefore, are more susceptible to be interpreted in allegorical terms] are sculptures thought or imagined as gadgetry for parades. The child's head, with its grotesque grimace that reminds of Messerschmidt's sculptures, is turned into a *cabezudo* [and an astronaut's helmet at the same time] that the author imagines as props for manifestations. And his groups of sculptures, which depict bizarre scenes inspired by the psychotic fabrications of Bosch, are conceived as a kind of political emulation of decorative ceramics' dioramas and presented as models for parade floats; they are, in short, machinery to move comments on reality to the public sphere.

The last room, which is also the darkest and most disturbing one, is dedicated to delirium. Tahiche Díaz' theatrical creations stage here the ravings of the astronaut. Underneath their texture there is a comical and yet bitter version of the transcendent discourse about art: the pathetic image of an artist [the subject that believes himself entitled and pretends his jump is relevant] like a repressed doll or a delirious character.

The conclusion seems unrewarding. But I think of it as a last joke; the staging of distancing from oneself or incendiary self-criticism. One could say that, at

⁴ **Translator's note:** original title «Barritada» is a pun on «barricada», 'a structure that creates a barrier', and «barrito», 'the loud, shrill cry of an elephant'.

the end of the road, the cycle of Knowledge's life and oblivion culminates: ceramic pieces are out of the oven; books return to the fire.

8th November 2015

I came back to Bajamar on a strange and sunny Sunday of the driest autumn in recent times. It was a peaceful day like those that invite to drive for pleasure instead of just travelling. Nice music playing on the car and a warm road; I drove without hurry, enjoying the caress of the wind on my hand resting on the window.

The entrance to the apartment exhaled the smell of the roast for lunch. Lately, Tahiche told me, he had been frequently cooking on the oven. The orange light coming from the electric resistance bathed his face when he opened the oven door to prick the meat. It seemed like it needed a few more minutes.

The first time we spoke about this exhibition, Tahiche defined his project as a «song to knowledge, science and art». He cited a well known aphorism by Goethe: «he who possesses science and art also has religion; he who possesses neither, have religion! »; this phrase seems to have a clear significance in the sense of establishing the superiority of scientific and artistic knowledge when suggests that enlighten people don't need religion because is a primitive medium for understanding reality. Similarly, religion would be a resource for those who lack culture and knowledge to find their place in the world.

However, for many, the meaning of the phrase is not as clear. The imperative of «have religion! » [*der habe Religion*] can be interpreted as the obligation or need to have a religion. In other words, the aphorism could suggest that religion is only a consolation for those that suffer the disgrace of not being cultured; but it could mean the opposite too: the imperative necessity of a religion, even if that is actually science and art.

What did Goethe really meant with his statement? It would be difficult to know, at least only from that phrase alone. Although I think the simpler interpretation of religion as true substitute for knowledge has little interest. The other interpretation, which suggests religion is necessary for human beings and, therefore, art and science are in fact substitutes of the religious experience, seems, for his devilish nature, much more attractive.

What intrigues me here is not what Goethe meant to say but what Tahiche meant to say when he cited him. In other words, his «song to knowledge, science and art» seems to suggest admiration towards the different ways

thought can be expressed; but it could perfectly point out that art and science “contain” religion and build on it, as religion [or, better still, divinity] is the ontological foundation of everything. And in modern times, one might hypothesize that is better to access divinity through art and science than through worship and devotion. Tahiche’s interpretation of the artistic process as an expedition and, in a way, as an initiation journey that is also anchored in the transcendent dimension of the private artistic experience and projected on the symbolic sphere, if is not a religious experience, surely resembles the way spirituality is experienced in some mystic variations of religion.

Actually, the metaphor of the journey has come a long way: it’s been used since ancient times to speak about life, death, poetry and delirium. And, in the times of the explorations, when the West discovered an immense world till then unexplored, the journey became an image of knowledge since exploration was a way to access [and dominate] others but also a mean to design conceptual tools for understanding them.

Clearly, in terms of the philosophical discourse [not of the geopolitical or the economic discourses] the concept of the journey is focused on the subject, who experiences it and therefore produces knowledge. That is to say, the key to the allegorical value of the journey is not the act of travelling itself but the traveller. That is why in the project of Tahiche Díaz continuously appears his own figure; this locates the coordinates of his expedition in the territory of initiation and interiority and also, I think, coherently relates his project to the comings and goings of Dante through Hell.

It should be noted, however, that in this case the artist is portrayed as a *madelman*; a doll that refers directly to both the idea of game [because is made to recreate actions and roles on an imaginary territory] and the idea of the model [because its presence tends to turn installations into dioramas], and therefore indicates that the discourse is really moving towards the territory of representation. More than Darwin, the astronaut resembles the character that, looking at the landscape in Friedrich’s painting, defines the archetype of a new relationship with nature.

Then curiously occurs that two apparently contradictory elements coincide in the exhibition: the presentation of some formal structures that feature a play of written fictions and the representation of the artistic experience and its private, existential dimension. So, in a way, there is science but also religion.

Thereupon, what did Tahiche Díaz want to say with his exhibition? It’s difficult to know since the project is a hell of nuances, but I would say that forms, in all his body of works, are mainly a rhetorical contraption that coincide with the logics of a literary fiction, thus acquiring an additional

dimension that refers in loop to the discourse itself: the exhibition is a model of the kind of artistic thinking that is, in turn, the origin of the exhibition. At the same time, the artist, who's an intelligent man, has identified the value of private experience as a piece in the game of politics. So the vital aspect of the journey presents itself in two different ways: on the one hand is a real circumstance and, on the other, is a linguistic element, another part of the fiction or a rhetoric feint inside another rhetoric feint.

While I snooped around the study it occurred to me that, in fact, the artist, like Dante [and Goethe himself during his famous travel] had used his descent to Hell to reinvent himself.

But this is nothing more than a poetic thought, like those of someone who has to speak about objects that elude words. In fact, there has never been a descent to Hell, a journey, a religion or symbolic elephant legs. They are all comedies; discursive strategies that are, after all, more than clay, the raw materials and textures of Tahiche Diaz' work.

The meat was flawless, I must say; I left the study grateful and satisfied. I have to tell him someday that a sprig of rosemary in the oven gives the roast an interesting touch. Driving back home, a Vetusta Morla song was playing on the car radio: «como un funambulista imbatible, dibuja en braile los pasos del siguiente mortal» ('like an unbeatable funambulist, draws in Braille the steps for the next mortal jump').