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Des-Cubrir: uncovering and discovering the work of Ricardo Brey

By [Maria Martens Serrano](#) *Fri, Apr 10, 2015*

A look at the work of Ricardo Brey, currently on show at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen. The exhibition "Fuel to the Fire" spans the artist's career, presenting work that has been out of sight for three decades, and his most recent projects, which are due to be exhibited in the upcoming Venice Biennial.



Fuel to the Fire, Ricardo Brey's current exhibition in Antwerp's museum for contemporary art (MHKA) cannot be called a retrospective even though it adopts a historical vision, its contents spanning the artist's career - from his initial ventures off the island of his birth, where he had established himself as a notable figure in the Cuban Renaissance, to his most recent projects developed in Belgium, his adoptive home. With Ricardo Brey it is anyway difficult to classify a piece as 'old' or 'new'. If a project is hidden from sight for three decades, only to be re-positioned and presented anew, then one might argue that we are looking at a different piece altogether. Throughout the exhibition it becomes clear that his works are hardly static in time, resisting any determined position in a chronological context.

With his *Papeles de Verrazano* (1985), Brey mimicked the passage of time by fraying the edges, carving out the trail of bug-bites through the pages. Knowing that these pages were out of sight for thirty years adds an element of true historicity on top of the fictitious antiquity that Brey created. By now, the pages are saturated with their own story, and time has indeed caught up with them. I begin my tour with Brey in MHKA's round-shaped room with a spherical sky-light, where this piece is presented as one long strip along the center of the wall. Originally, Brey explains, *Papeles de Verrazano* was placed as two lines, "but in this magnificent space, it's just one line. It turned out quite minimal".



Ricardo Brey, *Papeles de Verrazano*, 1985, collection of the artist, photo M HKA

Leaving Cuba for the first time in 1985, Brey headed to New York. During this time he developed *Papeles*, a continuation of his earlier explorations as an artist. Before stepping foot off the island, Brey was already trying to see it as if from the outside: from another angle, another perspective. He borrowed the vision of Alexander von Humboldt, a Prussian naturalist and explorer from the 18th century, copying his studies of plants and animals. “I was interested in playing with the idea of the original and the falsification. History. Myth.” It was his way of dissecting definitions. “At that moment, my objective was to search for the Latin American identity as seen through the eyes of someone from outside. Not from within; I had to take a distance to know who we really are. There was at the time a larger social questioning, I think in all of Latin America, regarding our identity. And Cuban artists reflected the same concerns. But I went to the extreme – then I went to the US, which is another identity, and where everything came crumbling down. The discourse of Humboldt simply didn’t work there.”

In North America, he came across the writings of Giovanni da Verrazano, a Florentine explorer (“an Italian opportunist, really. A 16th century pirate”). Verrazano was to New York what Humboldt was to Cuba. In New York you have the Verrazano Bridge, connecting Brooklyn to Staten Island, and this figure turned out to be Brey’s tactical bridge: he Xeroxed Verrazano’s writings, and drew over them the images of Humboldt’s studies. So, where were the pages all these years? “I had them hidden”, he says. Like a pirate’s treasures.



Ricardo Brey, *Papeles de Verrazano*, 1985; *The structure of myths*, 1985, collection of the artist, photo M HKA

In the center of the round room is a glass case with wooden edges. Contained within are white porcelain plates intermixed with pages similar to those on the wall; some shells, broken bits and pieces. Brey explains that the idea with this piece, *The structure of myths* (1985), was to encapsulate the *Papeles*, to “concentrate them into one point”. Overlooking Brey’s work can often feel as though you’re looking from both ends of the telescope at once: the consolidation of parts into a whole; the breaking down of the whole into parts.

A large part of Brey’s own identity is composed around music, something he studied as a child. Although he didn’t pursue this path, he claims to often “think as a musician”. “I consume music much more than images, these days”, he tells me. We’re standing in front of *Birdland* (2001)– “a portrait of my life in Belgium” – when he points to the saxophone nestled in the middle of the piece and asks if I knew that this instrument was invented by a Belgian, who “couldn’t find anyone here who would play it. It’s not until the saxophone traveled to America that it would really find its place. You can’t imagine jazz without the saxophone.” As a portrait, this piece explores the idea of the self as a cross-pollination of influences. For Brey, the saxophone serves as a symbol for finding a new definition of yourself in a different place.

But, to understand his work in terms of its aesthetic and technique, one has to look towards Brey’s origins. “I come from poverty – not a metaphysical poverty - a very physical poverty”. He tells me about the shortage of resources in Cuba, how artists would use bedsheets once there were no more canvases, only to then find that they had no more sheets left for the bed. In these conditions, there was a very real need to look beyond the surface of the superficial, to get the most out of what’s available. Improvisation, creativity responding to circumstance, learning how to “continue being an artist when you have nothing.” He then

tells me about a boxer from Cuba who would always end up in the corner of the ring – but that, actually, this was his tactic. Just when his opponent thought he had him cornered, he would respond more fiercely. Brey identified with this: “instead of perceiving reduced possibilities – I respond to them. You realize that your adrenalin in that moment contains all the answers. If I am in a space of abundance, I am lost.”



A creative response to a circumstance is literally washed all over what is perhaps Brey’s best known work: *Untitled* (1992), first exhibited at Documenta IX. Although Brey had previously stated that he wasn’t interested in providing a chronology to the exhibition, there is one work that can arguably be considered a halfway point in his career. Aptly positioned in the center space of the exhibition, this piece marks Brey’s recognition as an artist in Europe, and his integration into the Belgian arts scene. “This piece for me is very important, because it provided me with the total liberation of space and material,” he explains. However, Brey claims to have been lost in the process, overwhelmed by the responsibility of exhibiting at Documenta. “In the moment that I managed to transcend these concerns, I painted the whole thing using Coca Cola. Let’s just say I made some Cuba Libre.” Jokes aside, the effect of sprayed Coca Cola, with its burnt brown, rusty shade, is a sobering one. The whole installation reads of misfortune, with ripped and tainted bedding, tainted walls, and clear glass panels, the latter which were Brey’s principal element for this piece: “Glass, for me, is a material with a psychological

Ricardo Brey, *Ungrund*, 2009-2011,
Collection: Courtesy of Christine König Galerie
photo M HKA

effect. It allows you to see through into the other side, towards the solution, but you are unable to reach it.”



Ricardo Brey, *Untitled*, 1992, collection of the artist, photo M HKA

Often, though, by growing accustomed to a certain situation we may no longer see what is crystal clear. Awareness requires the effort to engage, to reflect. “After 20 years of being outside of Cuba, I felt like Ulysses upon my return. During that time, for a month, it was as if I was actually Humboldt. I said to myself: I have the privileged vision of seeing everything as if it were the first time.” While Brey was expected to exhibit paintings during his recent return, since he is primarily known as a painter in Cuba, he instead presented photographic installations based around one thing that had painfully stood out: Havana’s decrease in trees. Following a gas crisis in the 90s, many Cubans began using trees for fuel, but Brey claims that the reasons offered nowadays for the missing trees are often vague, pointing to a reality that is ignored. “I proposed myself to present this reality, to revitalize it.” It is not so much about the facts themselves but about reigniting focus, rediscovering the apparent. To stimulate this, the photographs make one look at the traces: the stumps, piles of ash; a tree that’s being burnt from within: “it is like a cancer that converts the tree into carbon, without yet being noticeable from the outside.”



Ricardo Brey, *Devil's Walkingstick*, 2013–2014, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris-Brussels photo M HKA



Ricardo Brey, *The insiders* at work in the project *Inside Out*, 2015 M HKA, photo M HKA

And from the outside, looking in, is precisely how the audience finds itself with Brey's most recent work: *Inside Out* (2015). Due to be exhibited in the upcoming Venice Biennial, *Inside Out* consists of a series of

boxes in which Brey has encapsulated the notion of discovery. With this project, the space that Brey works with is always the same – a black box, approximating 30cm in length and width – yet the possibilities for what’s inside are hypothetically endless. “Every box is a closed world,” he tells me, only visible once fully unfolded. When closed, each box has a small opening on top where you can catch but a glimpse of its contents – this is Brey piquing curiosity. He shows me one box lined with antique wristwatches from within, a glass orb in the center resting over some notebooks. He opens one of the books to show me its pages, handwritten by Brey as an exercise in remembrance: “I was trying to activate memories from childhood”. The contents of the other books in that box remained a mystery, and that’s the way it’s meant to be; every time I think back on that box, those books, my imagination is at liberty to fill those unseen pages. To draw in its audience with a sense of wonder, this project relies on a performative aspect in the moment of unveiling, which takes place at the hands of the *insiders*, a team of people who are in charge of presenting the contents of the boxes to museum visitors. “I have provided (the *insiders*) with an instrument,” says Brey, “and they are forming their own relationship with the work. From the beginning it was very clear that this project had, in its practice, a part that I would not be able to control.” All that Brey could control was creating a situation that would encourage the dynamics of chance: each box, each viewer, each *insider*, and the convergence of their respective beings around a set of circumstances that could not again be duplicated.



Ricardo Brey, *A dream of nine nights*, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris-Brussels, photo Isabel Brey

The Borgesian character of Brey’s work is difficult to ignore, but the artist is quick to praise one of his biggest inspirations. “If *Universe* is the ‘Library of Babel’, *Inside Out* is ‘The Aleph’,” he tells me. *Universe* (2009), a series of 1004 drawings, also forms part of this exhibition, although it is located off-site as an installation in the banquet hall of Antwerp’s 19th century Athenaeum. The series paints the picture of a fictional cosmos, but also includes detailed studies of our own nature, flora and fauna. With his choice of subjects Brey tends to return our gaze towards the raw elements, the images and objects that we can all, by nature, relate to. “This is precisely what the artist does,” he explains; “I play with all resources, not just those of my own memory, but of a collective memory.” And he recognizes in

materiality an inherent, symbolical ability to communicate: “you don’t have to add anything to the material, it already contains its own narrative. All you have to do is activate it.” And all that one needs to do, when looking at Brey’s work, is to engage in the act of inquiry – not with the purpose of finding an end, but simply to submit to the investigation; like a reader searching through an infinite library, an explorer of possibilities.



Ricardo Brey, *Universe*, 2009, collection of the artist, Installation Atheneum, Antwerp photo M HKA

Top image:
Ricardo Brey, *Love*, 2013,
courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris-Brussels,
photo Isabel Brey

By [Maria Martens Serrano](#)

Maria Martens Serrano is a Dutch-Salvadoran writer based in the Netherlands. She studied under a liberal arts program at University College Utrecht, going on to graduate with an MSc in Sociology from the University of Amsterdam. Chasing a broad range of interests, Maria has previously worked with a news-website, a human rights NGO, and for an experimental art performance festival. Past research involved studying urban development and street art in Amsterdam; whilst future research interests look towards gender/sexual identities and the socio-political struggles of LGBT groups in Latin America. She currently writes on topics of arts & culture. In addition to working as a contributor for Artdependence Magazine, Maria also organizes the content for their weekly newsletter.

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