

A LATIN AMERICAN ART SERIAL

by Hans Herzog



Miguel Angel Ríos, 2014, Photography: Jorge Rebellar

Miguel Angel Ríos (Born 1953 in Catamarca, Argentina, lives and works in CDMX, Mexico)

HANS HERZOG / DECEMBER 4, 2021 / 1 COMMENT

Is art play? Is life itself play? Like few other artists, Miguel Angel Ríos has «played» with himself, his life, and his art—and he took many risks in

doing so, sometimes winning and sometimes losing. But he always managed to retain his personal integrity and his artistic independence. What could be more valuable than that?

Only by dealing in a playful manner with things, with the world as such, do we find the proper distance from these things—and also from ourselves. For it is our concentrated play that reflects our very deeds and thoughts.

Playing serves us to explore, to «play» out all sorts of possible scenarios in our mind or in an actual simulation. In playing, we give ourselves over to experimenting; full of curiosity and joy we allow ourselves to be absorbed into realms as yet unknown. Playing helps children to cope with situations beyond their understanding, and likewise serves us as «adults» to assess the viability of an idea.

Ritualized play teaches us patterns for dealing with danger and violence, helps us break their spell and make them manageable. Even our own body becomes a plaything for us when we expose it to extreme situations, be it in sports or in eroticism... So it is not entirely surprising that artists (at least in conceptual terms) surrender to playing in order to advance their research—even at the risk of losing their selves in this play.

«Only dead fish drift with the stream»



Columbus Making Ripples, 1993, Pleated silver-dye-bleach print on canvas, MoMA New York, Gift of Waldo Rasmussen and AT&T NEW ART/NEW VISIONS Fund

This is a fitting motto for Miguel Ángel Ríos. It has always been his intention to pick up on Latin American life and socio-political reality in his art and to reflect them without turning into an educational moralist or an ideological pamphleteer. Not least against the backdrop of the celebrations of the Fifth Centennial marking the discovery of America in 1492, Miguel Ángel Ríos closely scrutinized the official historical «mapping» practice in a broad artistic research. In the sense of a seized territory to be analyzed and re-appropriated, field mapping, much like history writing itself, is after all equally subject to arbitrariness, ideology, and the aesthetics and particular political doctrines of the conquerors. In his interventions of historical maps, Miguel Ángel Ríos challenged nothing less than the socially and politically dominant system, including the absurd human audacity to compulsively draw arbitrary demarcation lines everywhere.

The brutality of play

Ríos turned to video in the early millennium, which he readily mastered with great confidence, much like his partner Teresa Serrano. A trip on the wild side in the Mexican desert in search of the hallucinogenic peyote spilled into the video «Ni me buscas... no me encuentras» (Don't look for me... you won't find me) in 2002. Only a year later, he created one of his masterpieces in «A morir» (Till Death), a three-channel video installation of just under 5 minutes that is unrivalled in its aggressive elegance and accomplished brutality. Huge black toy tops—called «trompos» and still in use in Mexico's countryside—are spun with great physical force before they crash onto a wooden stage, where they twirl around at a breathtaking speed, even the slightest impact with another spinning top overthrowing either or both. In this impressive metaphor, the artist's cameras have captured the playful dance with its ever-fatal ending in high drama that traces the vigorous, ecstatic power and splendor of violence metamorphosing within mere minutes to final death.

Playing all in



Video still "Piedras blancas", 2014

Likewise remarkable is the artist's video «Piedras blancas» (White Stones) of 2014, which was also produced in Mexico. Thousands of white stone balls roll down a mountainside like a stampede, pelting down wild and disorderly in

an inexorable eruption, crashing into each other or onto the ground that is flattened beneath them. Again, Ríos has come up with an excellent metaphor: for the rogue forces of nature running wild, or for an incessant flow of drugs finding their way as if by themselves, or else for never-ending migratory flows and movements...

Throughout the past years, Miguel Angel Ríos has created a whole range of further outstanding, dramatic video works. Some of them leave us both beguiled and captivated, others even slightly stunned, such as «Crudo» (2008) or «Landlocked» (2014). It is obvious that Miguel Angel Ríos has by far not exhausted his creative resources. Always in tune with the times as his art is, his works nevertheless transcend the present with all its inherent problems and effortlessly achieve universal significance.



Video "A morir" (Vimeo) <https://vimeo.com/114611179>



Video "Piedras blancas" (Vimeo) <https://vimeo.com/101040636>



Miguel Angel Ríos, 2014, Photography: Carlos Adán Cardenas

<https://www.sicardi.com>