

AESTHETIC ACTIVISM

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*Form is emptiness, emptiness is form
Emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness
Whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness is form.*

Solid Void, Reynier Leyva Novo's first solo exhibition in the U.S., could be seen as an illustration of a well-known passage of the sutra *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*, a most popular writing of Mahayana Buddhism. This branch of Buddhism ultimately considers that everything is empty, and in the Suñña Sutra, Buddha himself is famously quoted explaining that the world is empty. The idea of the void is crucial not only for Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other philosophical religions, but also in Western philosophy and mysticism. It is also a very important notion for science and has captivated numerous artists and writers around the world. Marcel Duchamp – not unlike Novo – took a plaster mold of a human vulva and casted it in metal for his sculpture *Female Fig Leaf*. He was fascinated by how through this process inside can become outside, front become back, concave become convex, solid become void, and vice versa, an inversion that relates to the above notion. Rich in suggestions and symbolic meanings, such operation is at the core of this show. In *Solid Void*, Novo presents two mirroring installations. One consists of five hundred plaster casts of the empty interiors of multiple containers conceived for diverse uses and for holding different liquids. These containers of varying designs range from teacups to bowls and test tubes, and were created by several cultures. Fifty of these pieces were then cast in metal and pressed on cotton paper to create the embossed prints that are displayed on the second installation on the wall. The show is thus a clear, silent, ordered, contemplative representation of the void that inaugurates the artist's *Changing Memories* series.

The void and the related idea of subtraction have been crucial to Novo's work. He "debugged" Soviet grandiose propaganda representations by subtracting the texts and images away from political posters, which were thus reduced to background color planes to make them look like geometric abstract art. As part of the same work, he also exactly reproduced fragments of two huge communist monuments on real scale, which became simply aesthetic forms emptied of the monuments' original meanings – the work was appropriately titled *Revolution is an Abstraction* (2016-2020). In *A Happy Day* (2016-2020), Novo removed from photographs the images of Mao Zedong and Fidel Castro, leaving empty spaces where the dictators' images used to be. In *Nothing About Nothing* (2018), he painted over and over in white the empty wall where his works that were censored in an exhibition and later in a biennial should have been displayed.

Eastern philosophical religions consider emptiness as a mode of perception, a way of looking at experience. As we can see in the above examples, Novo followed this concept in a worldly, radical way by using the void as a tool for political statements, to deconstruct ideological rhetoric, and even to sarcastically contest censorship. In Cuba he is considered a dissident, as much for his public position and actions as for his artwork. It is in this framework that we can understand why Novo stated that this exhibition was his most political work. However, if the previously mentioned pieces implied a critical agency for which the void was its weapon, using it as a means for liberation, *Solid Void* seems to proclaim a nihilistic worldview. Is the whole world an empty abstraction?

His work has also dealt with the void in a different vein. For *Black Blood Liquid Aesthetic* (2019) Novo calculated the ink to be used to print "texts that have not yet been written, or texts lost in time" and showed the liquid inside several pools, one for each absent text. It is interesting to note that here, as in this show, the "emptiness" of the non-existent texts were given a shape, a material representation of their void. Moreover, the calculation of the ink used to print these non-existent texts was an act of imagination, the representation of a dual void. Finally, *Library of*

Void (2021) was an installation in which Novo exhibited the courtesy pages of history books from his personal library, pasting on them phrases referring to emptiness in the same positions they occupied on the book's pages from which they were cut out, while the volumes themselves were absent.

Now, for this exhibition, Novo cast the containers' voids to represent them, to make present their very specific absences. But by so doing, as the show's title indicates, he not only transformed the void into its opposite, a solid object, but also underlined its ontological entity by taking its imprint in a double, emphatic representation that acts as a sort of proof of the void's existence. Similarly to Duchamp, Novo is enthralled by the inversion that can give the void a body, while denying it by the very act of making it solid. In this aporia the evidence of the void's existence becomes its negation. Unlike Duchamp, he is a formalist – as orthodox conceptual artists usually are – who follows a minimalist aesthetic based on repetition, cleanliness, and geometry, no matter the subjects he tackles or the artistic means he uses.

Novo is a prominent figure in a new generation of artists in Latin America who are enjoying broad international circulation and impact. His work stands out for its critical and simultaneously poetic, minimal conceptualism. In a remarkable combination, it is political, aesthetic, and analytical all in one. The installations in this exhibition are the most formalist and aesthetic-driven works that Novo has created. The visual effect they achieve is pristine and contemplative. In contrast with most of his previous work, which relates to historical events, documents, and other specific subjects, the installations here just refer to void: they are the artist's most abstract pieces. Simultaneously and without contradiction, they are his most conceptual works, full of thoughts as they are. They achieve a degree zero where the aesthetic and the conceptual meet. For Novo, beauty has been a means to boost thegnoseological, critical, and even the philosophical power of art: an aesthetic activism.