

Silvia Rivas: Philosophy in video

"Time is not a simple experience of duration, but a dynamism that takes us,
rather than to the things we possess, elsewhere."¹
Emmanuel Levinas

In recent years, Silvia Rivas has chosen video as a means of expression for her singular poetics. From this decision, she has managed to transmit sensations that induce reflection on such abstract or philosophical themes as time, the idea of the other, the vision of subjectivity and individuality, all of these notions are approached from an ambiguous perspective that functions as an axis for the different proposals that the artist makes through her work.

Rivas emphasizes approaches that refer to daily life, pointing out the depth and complexity of human relationships. For me the support has to do with the poetics of what I am saying, says the artist, emphasizing the importance for her of the choice of support and the materials she uses in her work.

Silvia Rivas graduated from the National School of Fine Arts Prilidiano Pueyrredón as a national professor of drawing and sculpture. She also took seminars with Victor Grippo, who was very identified with the link between the support and its concept; and for Rivas, Grippo's great lesson as an artist was precisely the relationship with the material, always taking into account the support, and making it the protagonist or an integral part of the poetics.

Although in a very different way, Silvia Rivas has also managed to speak to the viewer from the support, as well as from the materials she chooses to work with. This question has been a defining one for the choice of working with metals, water or resin, in previous stages. Likewise, when the artist decides to work intensively with video, she assumes it as another medium to express and achieve the sensations she is looking for.

At the same time, her work highlights a constant denunciation of the support, for example, the preponderant role that the pixel can occupy in photography, or the intention that the viewer does not lose the awareness that what he is really seeing is a screen, or a projection.

For Rivas, the image in movement is central, and thanks to it she manages to express what she is looking for. "Notes on time "² is a video installation that shows in different scenes the double nature of time. It was presented in 2001 at the Centro Cultural Recoleta and is composed of different videos. In this video installation an ambiguous proposal can be appreciated, which will be the axis in all the artist's work. It produces in it an opposition between legs and moving water: rain, waterfall or waves thanks to the combination of different videos. One of them describes a person climbing a staircase (where you can only see part of her shoes); in another video you can see a constant rain on a red background; in another one a composition of nine frames in which you can see in each of them a pair of legs, and after removing one of those frames, the artist develops a game with the red background associated to a waterfall.

There are some more videos, where the idea is the same, the presentation on one side of the water and on the other of the legs in movement. All the videos are made in red, black and white. The lack of polychromy will also be a characteristic of all the artist's work. Each video is accompanied by a sound that

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ética e infinito*, Madrid, La Balsa de la Medusa (colección dirigida por Valeriano Vozal), A. Machado Libros S.A, 2000, page 56.

² "Notas sobre el tiempo" was presented by Silvia Rivas at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in 2001. With this work the artist won the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Award, Video Installation Art. The videos can be seen in the artist's web page: www.silviarivas.com

intensifies the sensations it produces in the viewer (whether of the waves of the sea, the rain or the footsteps climbing the stairs).

I was interested in how time leaves traces and at the same time erases them, says Rivas. The treatment of time as a thing, and not as a concept, in the artist's words, is a mixture of subjective perception and something objective, ungraspable and that could be attributed a certain materiality. The development of time that the artist achieves through the videos is in no way narrative. She generally works with loops, which makes the viewer himself the one who makes the cut of the work, and who decides the duration of each video to move his gaze to the next one, immersed in an environment created especially by the edge. In this context, image and sound surround the viewer, causing sensations. In this way, Rivas manages to capture the instant and continuity simultaneously.

As Merleau-Ponty points out; "Seeing, is it not always seeing from somewhere?"³ The artist in her work deals with the French philosopher's vision of subjectivity. In "Todo lo de afuera"⁴, Rivas deals with the theme of the other and the definition of one's own individuality based on the other. Here he returns to the theme of ambiguity, since the relationship with the other is always ambiguous. In this video installation there is a play between videos that represent closed eyes that try to open, and others in which a group of people can be seen intertwined in movements, in a sort of human knot. These closed eyes look inward, and that look is a possibility of accessing the object; in this case, one's own subjectivity. On the other hand, the intertwined bodies are the other, the outside, but that outside also signifies and defines one's own individuality.⁵

In the words of Emmanuel Levinas: "the other is not close to me simply in space, or close as a relative, but is essentially close to me insofar as I feel- insofar as I am responsible for him"⁶.⁵ The philosopher posits a more committed bond with the other because otherwise there would be no such bond. The same can be seen in the work of Silvia Rivas; she points out that it is she because there is something outside, that although everything outside is inaccessible, intuition is a certainty that there is an outside and an inside. That is to say, it is possible to define one's own individuality because the other exists, and because there is an outside. Therefore, it is from the outside, from what is different, that the self exists.

Through these works, the viewer is immersed in his own subjectivity and wonders about the link with the other, as Merleau-Ponty says: "External perception and the perception of one's own body vary together because they are the two faces of the same act"⁶. By experiencing this video installation (because in a way it can be said that it is experienced and not contemplated), a new contact is made with the world, with the other, and in this way the contact with oneself is also rethought.⁷

Something similar happens in "Pequeño Acontecimiento"⁷; this project, as in "Todo lo de afuera", the artist works with performers from the village of La Caba. In "Pequeño Acontecimiento", she opposes videos with shots of the faces of the protagonists to videos in which she makes a traveling shot and the remains of an anonymous city can be seen. Once again, we find ourselves before the ambiguity that makes the spectator uncomfortable, makes him responsible and participates in it. This ambiguity opposes the individual with the anonymous of the city. For the artist, the performers are archetypes of identity, possibly much more representative than the population of the Federal Capital, and this work raises the issue of loneliness and the condemnation of one's own individuality. The faces look at the spectator and present themselves to

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Madrid, Editorial Planeta, page 87.

⁴ "Todo lo de afuera", a series of videos and video installations presented for the first time at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in June 2004. The videos can be seen on the artist's website: www.silviarivas.com

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *op. cit.*, page 80.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, page 221.

⁷ "Pequeño Acontecimiento", video installation presented at Espacio Telefónica in Buenos Aires, in 2006. The videos can be seen on the artist's website: www.silviarivas.com

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *op. cit.*, page 73.

him. A link is established but no guarantees are exhibited. The artist leaves it up to the viewer to recognize individuality (her own and the other's) or to continue in anonymity.

For Levinas, access to the face is not reduced to perception. "Face and discourse are linked. The face speaks. It speaks insofar as it is it that makes possible and begins all discourse. The notion of vision has recently been rejected to describe the authentic relationship with the other; the discourse and, more precisely, the response or the responsibility is that authentic relationship "8. And Rivas succeeds in transmitting these ideas, these questions about the present in a society characterized by narcotizing communication, in which there are no links between subjects, but less and less links and less and less observation of the other and of oneself. In short, the artist's denouncement is philosophical above the social aspect and calls for awareness of this reality.

From this same perspective can be placed her next work to be presented in September this year at the Museum of Latin American Art of Buenos Aires (MALBA) in which Rivas deals with issues that may arise from everyday experiences but that go beyond, have a depth that, precisely, question everyday life. In this case, about the condemnation to permanent action, where nothing is ever complete and often what one does does not achieve the desired results, but rather the opposite.

This time, the treatment of the work emphasizes a very deep link between the individual and the tasks he/she performs, an idea of awareness that can be seen throughout the artist's work, which can be said to be uncomfortable. Silvia Rivas draws attention to different aspects of everyday life that are often overlooked. There is a deep reflection on these facts, on the time that passes, on the link with the other and the link with oneself; this call for attention is achieved through ambiguity; where an eye that cannot open is opposed to a knot of people, or when water is opposed to a pair of legs.

This ambiguity is justified through metaphors or symbols that are essential in art and still are in the artist's poetics. Through images that oppose each other, Silvia Rivas causes sensations in the spectator that generate the questioning of his own everyday life, his relations with the other and with himself.

Florencia Malbrán, 2010