

# THE SAVAGE MIND OF MANUELA VIERA-GALLO

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One of the most striking qualities of the series *Anonymous Society* that Manuela Viera-Gallo is presenting, is how it uses a metaphoric, *bricolage*-like language as its technical and reflective model. *Bricolage* is not only a plastic, technical way of working; it is also a way of thinking, as Lévi-Strauss points out in his book *The Savage Mind*. To take an example: in one of the pieces, “The Nature of Power”, we see a carved wooden sheep standing on two feet, holding a grenade in its hand. But it’s not really a sheep, rather a wolf masked by and disguised under a sheep skin (a skin that closes with a zipper, giving it the appearance of a pair of overalls and, by extension, work overalls and all the connotations that that symbolic magnet attracts for those who care to see them). A curious case: Francisco Brugnoli also used —again metaphorically— overalls in his *pegoteados* (another way of saying collage or *bricolage*). Two metaphors — joined together by the *bricoleur*— resonate in “The Nature of Power”: the wolf and the sheep. This resonance can be (if you choose to approach it this way) a combination of Plautus’ *Homo homini lupus* (later popularized by Thomas Hobbes in *The Leviathan*) and the Catholic lamb (sacrificial victim par excellence). In Hobbes, the wolf is a metaphor for unrestrained selfishness, which inevitably runs counter to the common good. It must be muzzled —most effectively, according to the trusting Hobbes, by an absolute monarchy whose power is endowed by God. This very vernacular mixture (so Hispano-American and so particular to Catholic Europe) of an individualistic wolf and a Catholic lamb can be seen as a characteristic of countries like Chile, where an unconditional conservatism (when it comes to morals) coexists with an unrestrained liberalism (when it comes to economics). The wolf simply preys on the weak and then confesses its crimes at church before a lamb which forgives everything (including

itself, as we've recently seen). It's that simple. The grenade in its hand can be interpreted as a reference to those "lackey-soldiers" —not only in the military— who forever take it upon themselves to carry out the dirty work of an economic elite who run this tropical operetta as they please.

But underneath the capitalist wolf is the Catholic wolf (hiding under the wool of a Catholic, apostolic, Roman sheep). This lamb is vengeful and self-serving. In the Apocalypse we find it —and its seven eyes— on Mount Zion and at the center of heavenly Jerusalem. Nietzsche has already warned us of the essential perversion of the Lamb of God and the way it bases the existence of Catholics on a foundation of guilt and debt. If we go along with Nietzsche, what is hidden under the wool returns each time, inevitably, as a more complex and "wolfish" being (the lamb becomes a resentful wolf and the sheep skin transforms into mere camouflage of a resentment which, according to Nietzsche, is essential to Christianity). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the lamb which suffers and the lion which fights is redeemed by the child who plays. Could there be something in common between that child and the speaker who plays with metaphors and language? That Nietzschean child is no more than a metaphor for an impossible return (it is impossible, as Deleuze says, "to become an animal again"...).

But there is another question at play. There is a thinking process inherent to *bricolage* which Lévi-Strauss refers to as "the savage mind" (which also shares important similarities with a logical problem that pops up over and over again in epistemology, like a rock in a shoe: the logical necessity of completely arbitrary signs —*cascaras* in Spanish or "shells"). Later on I will conjugate *cascaras* (shells) with *mascaras* (masks). Reality is masked in logical shells which are combined this way and that. In contrast to engineering, *bricolage* lacks a method beyond its own idiolect (which is closer to the construction of metaphors, allegories and other tropes). Here let us differentiate metaphors constructed out of unavoidably

metaphoric character that for Derrida contain all names. The *bricoleur* assembles shells which are forever designations on loan. Its only method is one of trial and error and, above all, the workings of unorthodox questions about a surface turned into a second nature. That surface is the sign.

Let us look at another piece where *bricolage* is practiced not by the artist —although one never knows— but by the viewer (in this case the author of this essay). In the sculpture “Capitalism”, a similar figure appears yet again: the head of a wolf disguised under the mask of a pig displayed on a silver platter (a kind of Wolf-Holofernes or St. John the Baptist). If nothing else, the pig emphasizes the wolf’s more gluttonous side (in fact, in Christian iconography the pig is associated with one of the seven deadly sins: greed). If the symbolic capital of the Hobbesian wolf is selfishness, then the Christian pig’s is gluttony (with Jews and Muslims adding impurity to boot). In another piece, “Demand”, we see thirty wooden slingshots, similar to those used by students during their protests. Together with the slingshots, we also see thirty rocks engraved with thirty words associated with the students’ dissatisfaction of the socio-economic model they are fighting against (and which refer not only to “profit-making” in education, but also to a number of services that should be made public —as they already are in more prosperous European countries— but which have been privatized and, basically, grossly commercialized by the wolves, pigs and innocent little Sunday lambs). Some of these words include: installment, collusion, retail, interest, points, monopoly, demand, profit, fraud, bankruptcy, credit, capital, capitalism, etc. The slingshot also brings to mind David’s sling (and this is when the *bricolage* head of the pig-wolf can be compared to the decapitated head of Goliath, the philistine warrior described in the Bible). But the name on loan to us, “Goliath”, also refers (strictly) to the world’s largest beetle and to history’s first unmanned tank, invented by the Germans during World War II. It’s clear that the enormous beetle owes its name to the Biblical giant. But it is also clear that the little German tank got its name from the

over-sized African beetle. This, more or less, is how the head of the *bricoleur* works, as well as the savage mind (and to a certain degree the mind of us all). It works, basically, like an association machine shuttling between designators and certain shared qualities that allow for metaphor "construction" (which are constructed silently and collectively during the use of language). This machine is like a fly travelling from dung heap to dung heap and which, by chance, lands on the human pile (of clay) we find resting on top of a marble plinth: the sculpture "Stock Exchange". Not only does it bring to mind Piero Manzoni's "Artist's Shit", but also (and a bit more perversely) the spiral Solomonic columns of the Spanish and Hispano-American Baroque period (in fact, I can't help but think of the Church of the Society of Jesus located in Quito, Peru).

At first glance, "Stock Exchange" reminds us just how relative the values of the stock market can be (hence the reference to Manzoni and Viera-Gallo's sub-title "This Shit Could Be Gold"). But it also recalls what in psychoanalysis is known as the "anal phallus" and which refers, basically, to the feces a child accumulates in his or her sphincter. Freud assumed that the libido's second phase of development occurred around the erogenous anal zone, which is associated with the two basic functions of excretion (expulsion-retention) and the symbolic value of feces as a little piece of treasure and an extension of the Self. The second sexual pleasure seems to be the power to control one's intestines (those other Solomonic columns), which is also the impulse that can lead to "retentive" or "expulsive" fixations. I won't bother to mention the "retention" inherent to Capitalism. It has been expounded upon enough that both artist as well as critic here confidently limit themselves to mere *bricolage* (because after all the art object can never be more true than any other *bricolage*). More surprising still is that, according to Freud, the infant's experience at this stage—which can be gratifying or not—can create extremely disorganized people (the gratified) or, conversely, people who are extremely organized. What does this have to do with Viera-Gallo's marble plinth, so Baroque (maybe even Neo-

Baroque)? With that degenerate period so associated with excess, extravagance and incontinence? I have barely scratched the surface here of all the Solomonic columns populating Counter-Reformation and Postmodern art. Let's just say that the image of a Baroque turd resting atop a marble plinth certainly makes sense.

In regards to the "savageness" of such thinking, I wish to return to another symbol. In the video "Spent Capital" we see, barely, a person wearing a mask that makes her look like a member of the Nambikwara, one of the "primitive" tribes Lévi-Strauss reflected so much upon. The woman is in an office located in "Sanhattan", a contemporary complex of buildings and the symbol of Chile's (post-dictator) economic growth. The actress runs through the deserted office. She runs in circles, from dawn until dusk. She wears herself out. She is "spent" (as the title says) and her face expresses that fatigue. We see exhaustion and something like anxiety. Her feet chaff inside her high-heels. She takes them off. She continues running around barefoot. But what about the mask which mimics a primitive mask? It suits our needs perfectly (*nos viene de perilla*, as Chilean *bricoleurs* like to say). The woman only runs. She doesn't speak, but her face is (de)formed in a permanent expression. How should we "read" this? One of the most disconcerting subjects for paralinguistics—especially kinesics—is facial expression, and it has come to the fore on a number of occasions. The German aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg used to say there is no other surface as interesting—or distressing—as the human face. Wittgenstein, using another metaphor, compared it to (or assembled it as) a map one uses to understand the essentially indescribable "internal properties" of a person. Let's assume that the face is an ambiguous map, and that the mask is a shell of meaning inscribed—although unsuccessfully—on that indecipherable surface. The face is a surface of fleeting and forever changing expressions. To represent a feeling with a symbol—and the mask usually "represents" someone, for example a god or such thing—is what, according to Lévi-Strauss, ends up completing the human exodus from the animal kingdom:

the expulsion from Paradise, as it were (a theme already explored by the artist in another work entitled "Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise"). In that exodus, there are signs which are neither prints nor indices...such as masks. The uncertainty is masked, cloaked in a series of meaning-full shells. And so it is fixed on something that is usually more cultural construct than natural.

The world and language begin to construct one another in parallel. Within sensory biology, language is like a prosthesis which functions, precisely, as an extension of the five senses and the mind. From there, it's a shorter stretch to the dollar sign or eagle sign or scale sign (which we can see in the geometric "branches" of the "Networks" installation), than it is between facial expressions and masks. And from there to the pigeons with heads made of safe-deposit boxes (or satellites) perched on those same branches, it is an even smaller step. So it's no surprise these wooden sculptures are infused with the ghosts of African, Polynesian and Amazonian tribal idols. And it is that relationship which seals the convergence of *bricolage* and metaphor within the savage mind of Manuela Viera-Gallo.