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10. Mockus the Artist, Mockus the Idiot

Lucas Ospina

Antanas Mockus's artistic career officially started in 1993 at a national convention of arts at the National University where he was chancellor. Mockus tried to speak, but was jeered by a minority; so he turned his back to the audience, dropped his pants, and opened his butt cheeks with his hands. The saint's behind performed the miracle. A video recording reached a news channel and the entire country saw it. The newspaper *El Tiempo* and the Chancellor of the Universidad de los Andes¹ asked the President of Colombia to destroy the video. The long-time Director of the Museum of Modern Art deemed it "vulgar" and "unnecessary," and the Director of the Colombian Security Agency (DAS) called for a psychiatric analysis. Mockus responded with a tearful resignation, but not before he flashed a newscaster smile and compared his artistic act with an analysis bordering on formalism: his representation of his behind "was the color of peace," "white," like the Caucasian skin he inherited from his mother, a Lithuanian artist. Two years later, Mockus won the election to become Mayor of Bogotá.

In 2012, Mockus was invited to participate in the Seventh Biennial of Art in Berlin. The event, proposed as an intersection of art and politics, was a small but radical collection, and Mockus, as the politician-artist, seemed more real than many of the political artists there. Mockus was asked to comment on a piece, and he chose the work of the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles: the annual compendium of 313 covers of *PM*, a sensationalist tabloid from Juárez that always opened with a photo of drug

crime, along with an image of a girl taken from the endless annals of soft-core porn. As often happens with art on top of art, Mockus's commentary turned into more art: the installation piece "*Lazos de Sangre*" (Blood Ties). The Mexican flag hangs over a pool of acid and lowers every time someone is killed in Mexico. The attendees of the Biennial can stop the flag's fall if they donate blood or promise to decrease their cocaine intake. The work included its own bibliography and exhibited two books: one on philosophy, *How to Do Things with Words* by John Austin; another on sociology, *The City that Killed its Women* by Marc Fernandez and Jean-Christophe Rampa.

One might think that Mockus is, as many others, in transit between the uncertain world of politics and peaceful retreat within the condominium of fine arts; that he has gone from building policies to making "conceptual art." The perpetual presidential candidate Álvaro Gómez painted horses until his death, and former presidents Belisario Betancur and César Gaviria take refuge in culture, do paintings, or collect works of "contemporary art." It would be unjust to lock Mockus away in the same bestiary. Mockus has not had to use art as aesthetic surgery to hide the havoc of politicking. On the contrary, Mockus came to politics from art and philosophy.

Discussions about Mockus as a politician linger on the ideological nature of his administrations, and opinions vary; while some define him as a guardian of neoliberal policies, others see him as capable of developing upon the foundations laid by others. For some, he is an austere administrator; for others, he is a bad executor. He is considered an ethical animal incapable of fighting corruption, or a candid leader surrounded by a technocratic, pragmatic, and obstinate team.

Politically, Mockus positioned himself under the banner of the "anti-politician": this term became his sword. Once he was elected mayor, he continued wielding this weapon and, when he was invited to meet with the warmongering president of the time, he arrived at the presidential palace armed: from his belt proudly hung a plastic sword. Perhaps one day the National Museum of Colombia will have a cabinet of Mockus's curiosities: the glass of water he spewed at two oppositional candidates during the debates, the burlap suit he wore when he got married riding an elephant under a circus tent, the red cards used by his army of mimes against drivers who didn't respect traffic laws, the comical lycra costume that transformed Mockus into the "Super Civic Man" or the "Bulletproof Vest" with a heart-shaped hole where an assassin's bullet could pierce. This is his arsenal of symbols, of images that could be cliché, but that in the solemn and repetitive scene of political representation became, paradoxically, pure, honest genius, symbols of reflection, icons capable of drawing attention to what Mockus and his people called "Civic Culture."

After serving two terms as mayor of Bogotá and campaigning as a presidential candidate, the irony that defined Mockus as an "anti-politician" became disconcerting, and with time Mockus's performances as a political actor became scarcer. This was evident in the 2010 presidential campaign. In the debates, declarations, and public events, Mockus didn't have the same performative capacity as before (perhaps the only symbol that he and his party successfully introduced was a sunflower that looked more like an advertisement for cooking oil than an image from the candidate's former arsenal). However, the documentary *La Ola Verde* (The Green Wave), made by a group of followers about the boom and debacle of his presidential campaign, records two sequences of inconclusive actions, and two failed performances that, since his defeat, portray the best of Mockus the artist and recall the brilliant improvisational skill that launched his artistic career.

The first image occurs on a makeshift recording set on the eve of the first round of voting. The *Partido Verde* (Green Party) candidate's campaign advisors are anxious. In this first phase, they consider the possibility of losing by a small margin, but in the second round they plan to go all-in and emerge triumphant. This tempered optimism translates into conservatism at a time when they should be taking action. A movie director and an actor coach Mockus on what he should say and how he should behave in front of the camera. There's an ornate seat where the candidate will sit to give his speech. Mockus makes fun of the piece of furniture, saying that it is "old-fashioned," and he kindly questions the seriousness of his image consultants. He reminds them of the current president's histrionics, his use of the camera—"that machine"—and his tendency to stage boastful televised acts that say, "I am the strong president." Mockus proposes a variation, reminding them that his strength lies in "inviting society to look in a certain direction," and suggests the image of an "anarchist utopia": an empty seat. Mockus says that the real politicians are "more on the side of camera, editing, transforming images, and not there," and he points to the visible center of power. Mockus expresses his doubts about the presidential chair where they want him to sit: "That is a little fake. That is where Belisario sat powerless while they burned the Palace of Justice."² An Argentine producer, who seems to think that the problem is the green set or the chair itself, sticks up for the shot. Mockus then proposes two other ways of creating the image. His first proposal is a backlit shot that shows a hazy, almost invisible candidate. His second proposal is to find a rocking chair to go along with the sway of the speech—a rocker from which the candidate would give his address; the movement would correspond to the natural oscillation of intelligence.

The second performative image of *The Green Wave* occurs after the grind of the first round, that period of dead calm when it became clear that virtual enthusiasm in social networks can do little in the face of the *real-politik* of the country. Mockus, almost alone, argues with two advisors and proposes that they “campaign for Santos,” his opponent and antagonist. Seeing that overwhelming defeat is imminent, he suggests turning the debacle into a win: “Defeat the abstention, achieve monumental support for Santos.” His advisors, again, seem unconvinced. Somewhere between bothered and perplexed, one advisor calls Mockus’s proposal a “Machiavellian trick,” and the other says that it “gives him the chills.” Mockus says that “the good thing would be to make something authentic: communicative action disguised as strategic action.”

In both scenes no one appears to listen to Mockus, or at least no one takes the time to think about what he proposes to do with image; the documentary camera appears to be the only witness. In speeches and televised appearances we see a man seated in a chair who fluently recites a text without conviction, an actor tied to a rigid and agonizing script that leaves no room for improvisation: a frustrated performance. The ephemeral variations proposed by Mockus demonstrate his best self, his pure potentiality as someone who risks and intuitively creates. His image of an empty throne reproaches us for still living behind the messianic illusion of a king; his initiative to defeat abstention is a rational move that demonstrates the ultimate consequences of the logical progression of the democratic game.

None better than Mockus (2012:167) to describe himself: “My idea of the artist is someone who, in a prison cell, takes a piece of chalk and draws a border to define his space, a person who has more restrictions than those normally apparent. But upon defining those restrictions himself, he liberates himself.”

Mockus, the Idiot

The movie *Being There* (1979) is about a middle-aged man named Chance, played by Peter Sellers, who has never—and never means never—left the four walls of the modest palace where he is the gardener for an older gentleman from Washington.

One day his employer dies, and Chance, who knows only the world of his garden and what he has seen on television, has to leave. By pure luck, chance, or distraction, Chance is lightly hit by a millionairess’s car, who, fearing a lawsuit, takes him

back to her mansion and hands him over to the medical team that looks after her sick husband. On the road, she christens him with noble lineage; Chance, who is not given to speak or show signs of understanding what is being said, tells her his name and occupation: “Chance, the gardener.” She does what everyone else in the movie does and hears only what she wants to hear: “Chauncey Gardiner,” assuming that he is one of the Gardiners of noble blood. She is the wife of Benjamin Rand (a surname that parodies the powerful Rand Corporation), a big shot to whom presidents—even the president of the United States—owe their positions and who recognize Rand’s favors with regular visits to demonstrate their gratitude and loyalty.

During the 2010 presidential campaign in Colombia, Luis Fernando Vélez, a blogger for the online publication “La Silla Vacía” (The Empty Chair), posted “A revealing debate” where he excerpted a dialogue from the movie with the idea of comparing Mockus to Chance. Vélez (2010) sustains that in the scene “you laugh at this exchange because you know that Chance is an idiot and by responding with metaphors he amazes everyone with his wisdom and intelligence, including the president of the country.” To make his point, the blogger (*ibid.*) transcribed this dialogue:

President ‘Bobby’: Mr. Gardiner, do you agree with Ben, or do you think that we can stimulate growth through temporary incentives?

[Long pause]

Chance the Gardener: As long as the roots are not severed, all is well. And all will be well in the garden.

President ‘Bobby’: In the garden.

Chance the Gardener: Yes. In the garden, growth has its seasons. First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter. And then we get spring and summer again.

President ‘Bobby’: Spring and summer.

Chance the Gardener: Yes.

Benjamin Rand: I think what our insightful young friend is saying is that we welcome the inevitable seasons of nature, but we’re upset by the seasons of our economy.

Chance the Gardener: Yes! There will be growth in the spring!

Benjamin Rand: Hmm!

Chance the Gardener: Hmm!

President ‘Bobby’: Hm. Well, Mr. Gardiner, I must admit that this is one of the most refreshing and optimistic statements I’ve heard in a very, very long time.

[Benjamin Rand applauds]

President 'Bobby': I admire your good, solid sense. That's precisely what we lack on Capitol Hill."

Using this conversation as a starting point, the blogger (ibid.) pulled some phrases from speeches given by Mockus and concludes:

Now is the time that "democratic legality," "with education for all," "not everything counts," "Constitutional Court guide us" really mean something and don't just become, as in the case of Chance the Gardener, pretty phrases that camouflage the ignorance of those who repeat them.

With this dramatic finale, the blogger concluded his composition, ergo, the Mockus of the presidential debates was ignorant, an idiot who by pure chance became the chancellor of the National University and served two terms as mayor of Bogotá, an imbecile whose acts didn't mean "anything really;" in short, a danger to the country.

However, the blogger used the example of Chance the Gardener—or Chauncey Gardiner—with bias, and with the clear intention of attacking one candidate in favor of, without naming him, the official candidate of his choice: Santos, who when he was later elected president confirmed the blogger's ideological affinity by giving him an important post in his government.

But to return to the movie, if the point is to analyze politics in light of "Being There," the blogger left the penultimate scene of the movie out of his comparison. A group of big shots carry Benjamin Rand's coffin to his tomb, a memorial in the immense garden of his property crowned by a symbol carved in stone of the same image that appears on the US dollar: the pyramid capped by the eye-sees-all, the symbol of the Illuminati, a sect whose goal was to rule all nations under a new world order. The distinguished gentlemen discuss who will be the next president of the United States, given that the current one isn't up for reelection. They consider options, and after weighing the pros and cons, one man suggests Chauncey Gardiner, a man without a dirty past, a guy with strange ideas but who is a media symbol of acceptance, a person capable of inspiring hope (not fear), a sincere fellow who responds "I only watch television" when asked if he reads newspapers—and this strange act of honesty brings him up in the polls—a common, ordinary man who appears to be an astute politician but all he does is respond with the plain truth and leaves everyone else to freely delude themselves.

The blogger's comparison between Mockus, the politician, and Chance, the gardener, could even go so far as the last scene of the movie. Chance steps away from the funeral ceremony and goes into the woods. He lifts a fallen bush and then arrives at a lake. He turns his back to the camera, walks onto the surface of the water, pauses, submerges his umbrella beneath his feet, testing the depth, and then continues walking on water while the audio plays the president's funeral speech and quotes celebrated phrases from Rand. One final quote coincides with the miraculous image of Chance: "Life is a state of mind."

This final scene may be the movie director's (Hal Ashby) interpretation, or it may come from the author of the original book, Jerzy Kosiski, but it is here where the staging is at its finest and most convincing: the person we thought of as an idiot is now a savior, and if he is, is he Christ, or an impostor? The political metaphor does not refer only to the elected official, but also hits us with force, rebounds, and asks the voters, "Why do we need a leader-savior?" "Where does the need for redemption come from?" In terms of art and performance, the portrayal goes further: art as mental, cerebral, and the body of this strange man as the willing and propitious receptacle to receive whatever meaning we wish to give him. Art does not mean anything; we have to give it meaning. So we write texts about Mockus the politician, the performer, the unfinished work; we grind over theories and use them as vehicles for more verisimilitudes and crazy associations of a political, artistic nature.

The movie doesn't end there. The credits roll, and when the letters fade, we see Sellers repeating again and again the same scene, having to act like an idiot and recite inane, mechanical, half-witted dialogue. But parsimony is difficult—it's not so easy—and so, every time Sellers messes up, he laughs, they cut, and do another take. Perhaps the character of Chance the Gardener or Mockus the candidate hide something more, something that was left out of the movie. Something, in the case of Mockus, that couldn't be seen in his last campaign because the excess of consulting caused him to lose spontaneity and converted his serious game into simple and plain solemnity, or because during the campaign he was out of shape and his acting, which had begun degrading with time, was never as good as his initial performances. Mockus, the actor, never succeeded in embodying the character of the presidential candidate, and his attempts seemed more like self-destructive impulses than moves that promised radical development. His art wasn't fully realized; it went from a promise of happiness to an inconclusive promise. But what more can you expect from art or an artist? Perhaps his defeat has been his ultimate and greatest triumph.

Endnotes

- 1 The Universidad de los Andes is Colombia's top private university.
- 2 Belisario Betancur was president of Colombia in 1985, when the urban guerrilla group M19, entered the Palace of Justice where the Supreme Court was housed in the central square of Bogotá (located in front of Congress and very close to the presidential palace). The Army took control of the situation, apparently overruling the President, and ordered the tanks and its squads into the Palace. The fire burnt it down. All the judges of the Court were found dead. Recently, a video of a judge circulated in Colombian media showing him as he was being extracted injured but alive from the palace held by military personnel. The judge was later found in the ruins of the Palace executed. Various civilians, who were working in the Palace, disappeared and were never found. Many Colombians remember this event as the Holocaust of the Palace of Justice.

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