

## LANGUAGE AND MAGIC

### An Archaeological Approach to Tania Candiani's *Organum*

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To some extent, science and magic seem to be strongly related. For Malinowski, science is based on the reliance of men to conquer nature, thus closely akin to magic (1993: 3); in this tenor, contemporary artists who incorporate science/technology in their practices could also become magicians who generate experiences that lift aesthetics over conceptualism when encountering the artwork but, at the same time, address profound contemporary concerns on the integration and assimilation of technology in our society. *Organum*, by Mexican artist Tania Candiani, is the starting point to propitiate a discussion on various themes such as the relationship between art and technology, the extended aesthetic experience aroused upon that relation, a symbolic connection with previous experiences of technology, and a special consideration on the sonorous dimension of language. This artwork (figure 1) is part of the exhibition "5 Variations of Phonic Circumstances and a Pause"<sup>i</sup>, that will be displayed at the Laboratorio Arte Alameda (LAA) in Mexico City in 2012 ("Cinco Variaciones" 2012)<sup>ii</sup>, and its development is the result of an intense dialogue with the exhibition curator Karla Jasso.



Figure 1. Tania Candiani, *Organum*, 2012, variable dimensions. Computer render. Courtesy of the artist.

Tania Candiani, a voracious reader, is an artist who does not adhere herself to a single technique nor a unique way to proceed. Her quests are as diverse as the reality she faces. She aims to generate aesthetically and conceptually readable artworks that confront audiences with magic and amusement (Candiani 2011). Her work *Organum* is symptomatic of a particular way of understanding science as a resource to create technology of *magical* and *amazing* effects. This idea, however, is nothing new and 17th-century Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher is the key to understand this relation. His work allows us to know how mechanical artifacts are understood, especially in relation to music, and the specific concerns on create *magical* experiences with them.

This way, *Organum*, reveals symbolic relations between today's society and 17th-century European society in terms of the uses and experiences with media. This statement is linked to an approach followed by some theorists like Siegfried Zielinski, the so called *Media Archaeology* (Archäologie der Medien) that inquires on the discursive load

human objects and devices have had throughout history. The Foucauldian term *archaeology* differs from other forms of historiography for it is based on a “systematic description of the discourse-object” (Zielinski, 2006: viii). In other words, objects (i.e. media, artifacts, devices) are conceived as products loaded with discourse that determines the way we experience the real through them. For Huhtamo, Media Archaeology’s aim should be to analyze the cultural/political content reflected in media, for “the reality of media history lies primarily in the discourses that guide and mold its development, rather than in the *things* and *artifacts*” (1997: 222). We approached *Organum* based on this archaeological standpoint in order to reflect on the relationship we establish with technological means.

The work consists of an electronic instrument that resembles a musical organ. Although, strictly speaking, not a musical organ itself, the piece refers to this instrument, hence inserting itself in the historic relation to organ production and its experience. It was created to be placed at the former choir of the San Diego church, today Laboratorio Arte Alameda (LAA) in Mexico City (figures 2 & 3). The instrument has two keyboards: one is musical (black and white keys) and the other from an old typewriter, both connected to a computer that transform the input into language, words, and phrases. The organ is to be performed by an instrumentalist who reads texts about automata and robots that are first translated into musical notation as scores after a period of time without activity, the texts’ archives are *read* automatically by the machine without a player (Candiani 2011).



Figure 2. Organum being mounted at LAA's choir. Photograph by Mariana Pérez Bobadilla, 2012.



Figure 3. Organum's tubes falling into LAA's main nave. Photograph by Mariana Pérez Bobadilla, 2012.

Organs symbolically unfold power, for they are expensive and imposing devices. They are to be placed, generally, at parishioners’ backs in a temple thus creating an environmental experience with by occupying the whole space with their potent sound. They are not mobile instruments, but built site-specific, joined organically with the architecture (Snyder, 2002: 4). The relationship between instrument and player is worthy of notice; organists are not supposed to stand out, but create a sensation of the organ being played by itself (Davidsson in Snyder 84). In this sense, *Organum* brings the automaton property to a new level by *talking*. Organs, Davidsson (in Snyder 2002) stresses, were extremely symbolical in 17th-Century Europe and they were often related to the cosmos and Creation (78). Kircher’s name appears again; a plate from his *Musurgia Universalis* (1650) <sup>iii</sup> shows the world being created by a

musical organ (83). At the bottom of the illustration a legend reads *Sic ludit in orbe terrarum aeterna Dei Sapientia* <sup>iv</sup>.

However, even when *Organum* is a participant of this historical relationship with organs, its experience is given via the use of new technologies, thus placing it in the discourse of new media art production. The term *new media*, as observed by several authors (Graham & Cook 2; Zielinski 32; Paul 67; Kanarinka in Graham & Cook 35; Manovich, 2002; Krauss, 2000) is, nonetheless, ambiguous and inconsistent. We do not attempt to reconstruct the term and offer a list of features that new media art should have; however, we do stress the importance of the deconstruction of the term, and for the purposes of our analysis of *Organum* we opted to state that this artwork is part of a production tradition of art practices that incorporate art and technology in its creation, distribution or operation <sup>v</sup>. In this sense, we agree to say that the primacy of these art practices does not lie on the “newness” of the media but on the maturity of the work (Graham & Cook 2) and that, in general, these artworks not only are, but *do* (34).

Artworks that incorporate new technology in their operation expand the aesthetical and political possibilities when experiencing them. We have already stated a symbolic *co-occurrence* of feeling towards technology as a parallelism between 17th-century European society and the present; magic, as we shall see, is a constant in both moments of humanity. We have not attempted to do an absolute and total parallelism between contemporaneity and the 17th century, but to highlight timeless characteristics of the former that have been present in humanity among different historical periods and that found convergence in our times. *Organum* makes evident a close relation between art and science. Until the 17th Century (especially during this period), an intense and narrow relationship between art and science occurred. It was a period when art could have benefited out of scientific explorations, and science could have been shown in artistic and poetic ways.

*Organum* operates in the limit between the scientific and the magical, as an artifact that amazes for doing the unexpected, the unusual. It is an inventor/magician’s creation that erases the distance between cause (playing the keys) and the extraordinary effect: the speech. However, its concealment lies in the inaccessible complexity to the general public towards technology. In this sense, magic is possible because it does not show its mechanism, but only renders the amazing results of a talking machine.

Eco (2002) states that magic is found in technology for it tightens the path between cause and effect. Technology is not adhered but integrated to culture; in other words, technological production is generated from and for particular social and cultural needs (Eamon, 1983: 172) and it is ecologically assimilated in society. Astonishment towards technology could be lost in the quotidian; however, the latter always retains its magical component of hidden process, unknown. The sense of immediacy between input and outcome is, for Eco, where magic found its way; in other words, magic simplifies the complexity procedures and makes the difficult seem easy, it delivers the mechanical processes with *sprezzatura* <sup>vi</sup>, that is to say, simplicity, immediacy, grace, nonchalance.

Circumventing language itself when analyzing *Organum* would be a mistake. The work is loaded with sound software that enunciates all the possible syllables in Spanish. It connects us again with the acoustic component of language and, moreover, it reflects on its graphic representations for texts are translated into scores that are later interpreted in the musical keyboard by an organist. The shift between representational systems is done in the same way Kircher related music to the balance of cosmos and the Creation, and in the same way he invented musical algorithms for automatic composition, i.e., the equivalences were made arbitrarily, equaling a syllable to a single note or chord. At the same time, they follow a systematic operation that codifies, for example, more common syllables with easier notes and less common ones as complex triads (Candiani 2011); this way, syllable “de” (common) is represented with note A from fourth octave, whereas “cuer” (less common) with chord Abm7.

The work explores the validity and arbitrariness of translation and equivalence between signic systems given all forms of representation are conventional. This is an exercise of *ekphrasis*. Traditionally, ekphrasis was conceived as the textual description of a visual work; however, following Gabrieloni (2007), we focused on how this translation operates between different media, i.e., translate between forms of experience.

*Organum* renders language in its oral form; it brings text back to sound. In addition to this, it tells us about our own approach to language: fragmented, partitioned, just like we learn to talk by sounds of letters and then syllables. The machine articulates sounds to form words just like humans articulate organs through their body to create sound. Furthermore, language as sound propitiates the reflection on temporality of the text; that is, when it is enunciated as sound, language acquires the variable of measurable time that affects its meaning; hence medium (mechanical sound) and time determine the content and reception of text.

To conclude, contemporary artistic practices use resources of science and technology to broaden the span of aesthetical experiences. The way in which they are integrated in the 21st Century is similar as it was in the 17th Century. The ideas of the machine, temporality, the multisensory experience, and magic, as well as the tight relationship between science, technology, and art, are also point of coincidence between these two periods. These bonds serve to question the newness in new or electronic media, and their relation to art. Quoting Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer:

In the frenzy of many of my fellow artist colleagues who talk about “new media,” I precisely dislike talking about it in terms of “new” [...] because I do not believe that what we are doing is something original, but it is exactly the connection that it can have with precedents what enriches the artwork. (“Arte y ciencia I” 2009)

Tania Candiani does not participate through her work in this *frenzy* of technological development. In her Latin-American specific context, she does not invent great new technology nor does she use the most recent advances

available; conversely, through reflection on the artifact, the machine and the medium, she offers beauty, a poiesis of the technological in its magical possibilities. Candiani, with *Organum*, tries to make possible the impossible, making real our illusions in a time when everything is achievable, and at the same time holds a critical posture by questioning the insatiable desire for the new.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> In Spanish “5 variaciones de circunstancias fónicas y una pausa.”

<sup>ii</sup> This text was written several months prior to the exhibition.

<sup>iii</sup> Plate XXIII from book X.

<sup>iv</sup> “Thus plays the wisdom of the everlasting God in the earthly orb.”

<sup>v</sup> The root of this idea is *Laboratorio Arte Alameda* curator Karla Jasso.

<sup>vi</sup> The term is borrowed to Baldessare Castiglione from *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528).

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