

Juan Beladrich

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A note before reading

For a better understanding of this thesis, I think it's important to mention a couple of details in advance:

- EMPIRE is one of the best-known film magazines in the world.
- In the Appendix section a special attention is given to some of the most important sources of inspiration for this thesis. Those names are written in **bold** in the introduction that follows this note.

Introduction

by Andrea Cardell

In a new anniversary of his death, **EMPIRE** decided to re-publish an interview I did with Juan Beladrich on the occasion of the international premiere of his film *Klien* in the UK and, subsequently, the US back in 2010, and asked me to give an introduction to it.

For the ones who knew Juan, we were always aware that whatever he did -his work being mostly texts and films, but also with his photos, installations and videos- we should always read between the lines and look for the hidden messages that were surely there.

Whoever approached one of his works without knowing this would miss most of what was involved in almost everything he did: the influence of **Jorge Luis Borges** and his meta-referential texts; Asian cinema, specially the films of **Takeshi Kitano** and in particular what the Japanese director himself called his “artistic suicide” trilogy: *Takeshis’*, *Glory to the filmmaker!* and *Achilles and the tortoise*, as a constant flow of how to present a story; the ideas of **Guy Debord** and **Isidore Isou** regarding the renewing of the media he chose to work with; the influence of Dada since his teen years and how a book like *Lipstick Traces* by Greil Marcus was able to put these last three (Dada, Lettrist International and Situationist International) and punk, a movement very dear to Juan specially because of his musical background, to end up with something that, in a way, changed his way of looking at both cinema and literature, and opened possibilities concerning the approach towards both filmmaking and writing. To that we can also add the influence of the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the US, especially artists under the umbrella of Seth Siegelau like Robert Barry and Joseph Kosuth (an introduction to this movement can be found in the book *Conceptual art and the politics of publicity* by Alexander Alberro); very different filmmakers like **Jim Jarmusch**, **Alexander Sokurov**, **José Luis Guerín** and **Lisandro Alonso**; and, as said, music: from his classical music upbringing, the influence of The Beatles, his punk drumming in his teen years and the influence of jazz with formations like the Dave Holland Quintet and Medeski, Martin & Wood.

But if you were in front of any of his work, there is a big chance that you could have missed that because Juan, also influenced by Duchamp, thought that the work of art not only was completed by the audience but the actual meaning of the piece was given by the viewer or reader.

Much has been written about this and Juan himself has said very little about it unless directly asked, and even then he played with the notion of not knowing; because playing was as much a part of his work as it was content and form. I still remember him explaining to me the reasons why, in his opinion, the Situationist movement failed. He told me that Situationism wasn’t about art, and that in his opinion, and of course he wasn’t the only one that thought this way, Debord failed because he couldn’t change what he really wanted to change, which was the French government of President Charles de Gaulle; but he failed even more because the biggest accomplishment of S.I. was to manage to be quoted and referred to mostly by lots of artists as inspiration for their artwork, and S.I. was a non-artistic movement, even an anti-art movement. Of course, May of 1968 was an incredible movement and an extraordinary moment, and it showed that things could be changed if the

willingness existed. But he wanted a revolution that, in the end, didn't happen the way he wanted; so after that he made three more films and some texts and then he decided to retire and started to design a war game. After being one of the biggest inspirations of May 1968, Debord saw the aftermath and decided to go into virtual seclusion to design and play a game with his second wife in a small village in France, until eventually committing suicide.

Juan shared that: he always thought that he failed; even when he didn't. To the very few people that actually knew him, he was a person that preferred his own company, but at the same time he hated himself. He wanted to be alone but he didn't want to be lonely, and that small boundary was something he continually explored in his work. Every time he decided on a subject, he'd go to its furthest boundary and try to bend it as much as possible in order to accomplish something, most of the time not knowing what that would be because, in his own words, "if I know where it ends I get bored and I don't do it. I don't want to know the endings, I prefer to be taken there by the process."



Juan Beladrich at the set of Klien

As much as Borges introduced him into the notion of not really knowing if a text is a work of fiction or an essay (or both, or none) and played with the reader quoting people that existed together with other authors that never did, conceptual art as a whole and some of its artist in particular, like Kosuth and Barry, gave a new shape to the idea of bending borders that Juan had.

As one of his teachers said to me, Juan never compromised; he always wanted to challenge the audience no matter who they were. From his classmates at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, his teachers, his friends, his family and specially one of his brothers, probably his most fierce critic but at the same time an

anchor in difficult times, whom he loved dearly and who was also a big influence in his life.

The interview that follows is divided into two parts: one from a day of shooting in 2009 and the other from a week before the UK premiere in 2010. The first one very informal and the second one more traditional, they are here re-edited and presented together as my intention to show the way he thought, wrote and made films, but mostly how he perceived himself, his influences, his environment and others.

At the time of the interviews his main goal was for his work to be “different”, and, although he never accepted that, he succeeded, *Klien* being both proof and documentation of that success. The title for the interview I had chosen at the time played with him talking about how so many influences can be brought together into one final result, but never forgetting that learning still remains and lays in its process, and that’s why I insisted on keeping it unchanged.

I hope this introduction, and the following record, serve as clarification for his choices and his ways.

Klien,

or how the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts.

Juan Beladrich has done it. His film *Klien*, Juan's first feature, will open in cinemas all over the UK 27th of March, four days after he turns 33, and a week later in the US. Why is this important? Why did this magazine consider this article for the cover but in the end didn't make it there (although in my opinion it should have)? Well, because *Klien* is one hell of a first feature. **EMPIRE** went to visit the shooting last year and I interviewed him informally on location (an old house in The Hague waiting to be demolished by the state some time next year) and I decided to interview him again now, in a more proper way, to see what created such a fuzz in our redaction.

In September 2009 Juan had a conversation with a friend via chat and a name came out: *Klien*. He promised her he would make a film about a "socially challenged girl" (as he says it was agreed on) that is trying to open up to a world she doesn't like but she needs to be part of in order to change her life.

A chronology of events after that conversation can be written like this:

October 2009: brainstorm begins

November 2009: writing of the script

December 2009: cast and crew search and location scouting

February 2010: filming on location (all the shooting was made on location)

March 2010: month off

April 2010: editing

May 2010: first screenings for cast, crew and friends (the ones that weren't already part of the cast or the crew)

July 2010: final version completed

August 2010: first screening. Start of the snowball

March 2011: international openings. This interview.

"The snowball is a very simplistic metaphor, but it was a lot like that" he says at home. Well, not 'home' but 'the apartment' as he calls the place he lives in. "It's not my house. I rent a room from a friend here. It is his apartment. And this is my room."

EMPIRE: A little too picky, don't you think?

BELADRICH: Yeah, maybe. But every time I say 'home' my brain says 'This is not your home' and I have to make the comment and clarify it. So saying 'the apartment' is, in the end, shorter.

His way of working is extremely well presented on screen. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

The *Klien* of the title is a girl in her early twenties. She had a regular life with her upper middle class upbringing that gave her almost everything she wanted without even having to ask for it. Mum, sister and, specially, dad are ever-present in her life. But she's not happy. She has very few friends (well... one actually) and when that

friend of hers goes away for five months to pursue a project 10,000 kilometers away, Klien looks around and there's not much: there's her family, of course, and there are two more people in her life, Anne (played beautifully by newcomer Sheila Teer) and Sean, a mesmerizing role from Darren Konchesky in his first lead after working in commercials and a couple of shorts. *Klien* is about Klien, but Klien is never on screen. Almost.

EMPIRE: I know the genesis of the film is about choices, and you have made some very interesting ones. Talk us through here.

BELADRICH: Well... Klien is much more a promise than a film. At least that was the beginning. I was chatting with a friend and we started writing about how she wanted to change some things in her life that weren't working for her. She had a good relationship with her family and a couple of friends and all that, but there was a core issue that wasn't working so well: herself. Her relation with all those aspects wasn't, how can I put it, satisfying enough for her so she felt lonely. And that was becoming a circle because of how she felt and thought about her friends and her family, specially her family. She began thinking that they were dragging her back and, although she loved them, she had to separate herself from that. We talked about how all that was affecting her personally and also her work and future possibilities. And that's how the term "socially challenged" came up. It was a joke for us, an internal joke.

EMPIRE: Is that why you've chosen almost not to show her? Because she is, in a way, gone?

BELADRICH: Not really. While I was thinking about how to write this script I realized that this was much more about me than about her. That was the key to writing this story. Because it is a story, not a script.

EMPIRE: There are no written dialogues.

BELADRICH: No, everything is rehearsed improvisation based on situations I've written that the actors have to go through. I read that Bergman used to work like this and I thought it would be an interesting experience so I tried and it worked perfectly.

EMPIRE: How long was the story?

BELADRICH: After all the corrections and reviews, it ended up in 12 pages (*laughs*).

EMPIRE: So that would have given you around 12 minutes of film if we consider the theory that one page of script usually is around one minute of film.

BELADRICH: True. But of course the 12 pages are situations and descriptions of locations. There are no dialogues there. If I should write the after-shooting script it would be considerably longer.

EMPIRE: And did you end up writing from your own perspective?

BELADRICH: As I told you, writing it from hers just wasn't working. It was when I actually started writing it as I was seeing it, from my point of view, that it began taking shape. It reminded me a lot of how Richard Kelly approached the making of his film *The Box*. I remember reading that he couldn't put his finger on why wasn't the story working while he was writing it until he realized that he should place it in 1976 instead of 2009. And then he built up from there. Changing the perspective allowed the story to flow and it gave me more room to write it.

EMPIRE: Yeah, but there are very different buttons in this film to be pressed, not just one like in Kelly's film. Although here you may also win a million and someone may also die.

BELADRICH: Someone will die. But that's always like that. Someone always dies.

EMPIRE: On screen?

BELADRICH: Not necessarily. Although someone does.

EMPIRE: And what about off screen?

BELADRICH: We can say I've died already, to begin with; and Klien too. It's again a very simplistic way of answering and it can be read as me trying to be interesting when there's no need. But what I mean is that I'm not the person I was when the project started. Even my relationship with the real Klien is not the same.

EMPIRE: How is it now?

BELADRICH: As it was, it died.

Juan talks a lot, but only if asked. He knows about this and it was what took him to filmmaking. An amateur writer since his late teen years, in his mid-twenties he realized that words weren't enough. The "one image says more than a thousand words" became more than a cliché: it became a goal.

BELADRICH: When I started making short films I wanted to be able to say something without using even one word. I wanted to completely get rid of my writing background, especially of the extremely long dialogues I was making at the time. That's why *Los Muertos* (the second feature of Argentine film director Lisandro Alonso which follows *Argentino Vargas* on his first day out of prison) was so important for me. The first time I saw it during the International Film Festival Rotterdam I didn't like it. I even remember rating it 2 out of 5. But it got stuck to my brain for over a year; it just haunted me and I couldn't figure out why. It was there; not constantly but often enough to start looking for information about it until I could get to see the film again. I was already living in The Netherlands at the time, of course, so I couldn't get the film anywhere, but I had to watch it again. One year later the film festival itself edited it on DVD so I bought it and watched it again. And I loved it. It was clear: I actually saw my own search there; but also so much more. To begin with, that I should get rid of some rules. "Not having any dialogue whatsoever" wasn't it. I *could* have dialogue if I wanted to. If it fitted. If it was important for the film. And for this film it is important, I think.

EMPIRE: But not for your short films.

BELADRICH: Not really. At first I was very busy with image and only image. I made *11011* in 2007, I think, and it's a good example of that. I watched Alonso's next film (*Fantasma*, 2006) and it gave me this idea of a person at the moment of waking up. Sometimes in those first seconds of being awake I don't know anything of my surroundings or about myself. I think that had a lot to do with me moving to The Netherlands leaving everything behind following a relationship that, in the end, didn't work. I wanted to get rid of my past but the cut, although great if I look back, had its consequences. That combination was the trigger.

EMPIRE: The chess sequence in *Deiltvei* too.

BELADRICH: Yes. Although by the time I made *Deiltvei* (2008) I realized the importance of sound in order to create atmosphere. Alexander Sokurov said in the documentary *Islands (Ostrova. Alexander Sokurov)* by Svetlana Proskurina, (2003) that cinema is the poorest of art forms because it borrows image from painting, sound from music and text from literature. But, if correctly crafted, it's the one art form that best can create moods, atmosphere. And I think that's why I love cinema: the possibility of creating that situation. That, and the possibility of failing so miserably in the process.

EMPIRE: You just used the word 'situation'. How much Debord is there in your films?

BELADRICH: Watching and reading Debord is a great love-hate exercise. Take a film like *In girum...* (*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978): besides the palindrome of the title, something that to me is already interesting because of the playing-with-words aspect of it, the way the film begins is just amazing. I remember reading the script before watching the film and the first line seemed to me like he was saying ‘let me tell you something: I am right. And this is it. And you will read’ and I kept on reading. And then the film! I remember I read that script at my brother’s apartment in Buenos Aires in the bathroom while smoking (the bathroom was the only room where I could smoke) and I was thinking that he just didn’t care, but at the same time he did. Of course he cared. And that’s why Debord ended up all alone. He said “I will make no concessions to the public in this film. I believe there are several good reasons for this decision, and I am going to state them.” The film starts as an attack and I think that that’s because he cared. But also because he knew he failed. And he acknowledged that by retiring from writing and filmmaking in order to play war games with his wife. I used to think that fighting was the way of doing things (I still do in a way) and he fought and argued with everyone, including Isou, whom I think influenced me even more.



Left: Isidore Isou on ‘Venom and Eternity’, or how to reset filmmaking. Right: Maggie Cheung on ‘Irma Vep’, or how to remake the tale of a Parisian vampire woman with a Chinese born actress that speaks no French and at the same time not sell out your cinematographic principles.

EMPIRE: With his books?

BELADRICH: By being, by writing; but very concretely with *Venom and eternity*. Because although I don’t believe cinema is dead, I do think it “smells funny”, to paraphrase Zappa. I want my work to be *different*. That’s the key, at least right now. The first time I saw *Venom...* (*Traité de bave et d’éternité*, 1951) I was annoyed by it and I wanted it to finish. I seem to be driven towards annoying things (*laughs*). But the idea behind it is what’s so interesting for me. That’s the first thing I look for in any form of art. Even when I don’t enjoy it. Specially if I don’t enjoy it, actually. *Venom...* separated the elements of cinema and that was a kick in my teeth. That and the fact that I came upon it almost by accident, searching for something else; and that ended up becoming my first book: *P.I.*

EMPIRE: So was “le cinéma discrèpant” the answer?

BELADRICH: It wasn't *the* answer. It was *an* answer. Another way. A new way. I thought, "It can *also* be like this". It can be in any way. A new attack on my own set of rules, my a-priori categories, as Kant would put it.

EMPIRE: So you used it.

BELADRICH: I did for some parts, yes. But it was not a rule. I didn't want my film to become *Irma Vep*, although I love that film. The problem was that I ended up with a new rule: no rules. And I was inside that circle and I couldn't get out. It was a combination of things that I needed: Isou, no rules, rules, atmosphere, etc. And *The wayward cloud* of course (*laughs*).

EMPIRE: The Tsai Ming-liang film?

BELADRICH: Yes. After watching it I remember thinking that it was a great film and there was a lot to be learned from it. Specially that, although it was of course not the best film ever, someone actually thought about this story and made it into a film; a great film with one of the best end scenes ever made, by the way. Ideas. So I had to remain open.

EMPIRE: And what was the breakthrough?

BELADRICH: There were a couple of them. First, my trip to Buenos Aires, that's where I got this idea. I've actually got to start knowing Klien three weeks before going there so actually being in Buenos Aires wasn't easy in that respect. It was also the first time I was back there after six years, the first time I saw my family after six years.

EMPIRE: How moving was that?

BELADRICH: Very moving indeed. I knew that going back to BA was going to change me in ways that I could never get myself prepared for, mostly regarding my relationship with my family; something that all my life worked quite badly. And to add to those two situations, I was back in a city that was horrible and home at the same time.

EMPIRE: Is Buenos Aires home, then?

BELADRICH: It's much more home than Rotterdam, at least I felt it much more home than this. But it's not the city what made it home; it was the people. The thing is that, in the end, reflecting on the combination of all those factors was a bit too much sometimes. I remember being alone in my brother's apartment the second night and all I wanted to do was cry. And I was staying there for 26 more days! When I got back to Holland, I saw that the first two weeks in Buenos Aires were not so great, to put it mildly, if I was alone. Then I got used to BA. My family was always great, of course, and my friends there too. That was amazing. But I lost Klien.

EMPIRE: What do you mean?

BELADRICH: She just stopped talking to me and mailing me. I knew that was going to happen even before going to Argentina, but there was nothing I could do to even try to change that at the time and I don't like those situations at all. I actually didn't even want to think about it at that moment.

EMPIRE: And was that the trigger for the film?

BELADRICH: Partially, yes; the trigger of coming back to my room here in Rotterdam to start thinking again, to know that the trip changed me but not knowing how. And to question whether it really changed me or I was imagining or wanting that change.

EMPIRE: That's Sean's puzzle, Darren Konchesky's character. And the other partial triggers?

BELADRICH: Another partial trigger was realizing that, despite all the differences in almost every aspect of my life when compared with Klien's, her search was mine too.

EMPIRE: Is this film so autobiographical?

BELADRICH: Not really. But the starting point is I.

Leaping back a year, Juan Beladrich gives feedback to actor Darren Konchesky in the kitchen of an old house. Darren is standing by the sink next to a pile of dirty dishes, the tap leaking in a pan that's almost completely full. If you focus on the water sound, it drives you mad; and the microphone operator reminds the director about this. Juan half-empties the pan and, after talking with Darren, he reminds the sound people that the microphone should always follow Sean, Darren's character.



Feet emotions - Production shot of Klien

There are two cameras on location, but one of them is in the living room. The second one, the one in the kitchen (kitchenette, actually) is almost on the floor, with a cameraman looking through the viewfinder lying face down on three low chairs set next to one another. It's the third take, and it's a silent one except for the water even though the microphone never stops moving. "Set noise is very important," Juan would

tell me afterwards, “and every room has its own. Here we have the water, of course, but it’s also the furthest away from the road outside, so I prefer to record the muffled sound of the cars here first and then work it afterwards while editing, if that’s necessary.” Juan likes the take and goes outside to have a cigarette while everything gets prepared for the next scene. I count six persons in total: there’s the director, the actor, the cameraman, the microphone operator, the sound recorder and the gaffer. Only two persons are missing: actress Sheila Teer, who plays Anne, and Kathy Shore, that plays Klein; they went to buy food for tonight’s dinner as they have no scenes to shoot today.

“Everything is very small here. How did you even find out about us?” Juan asks me. I tell him that I wasn’t there as an **EMPIRE** reporter but more as a mere observer, a curious someone that was in the same city and was told by a friend about the shooting, and after watching Juan’s short films online I was looking forward to see how he worked. Juan joked about kicking me out of the set (“get the fuck out of my set” were his actual words while pointing outside, laughing) but eventually I did have a chat with him.

“We are eight persons in total, although there will be some scenes with other extras, some with dialogue. If I’m not mistaken there will be five or six more non-actors appearing on screen, but nobody else off it.” Juan prefers to combine working with actors and with non-actors because, to him, they can bring things on screen that many actors can’t. Much in the tradition of some directors of what the critics called the third wave of ‘New Argentine Cinema’ like Carlos Sorín, Lisandro Alonso, José Celestino Campuzano and Martín Rejtman, the use of non-actors gives a different authenticity to the director’s vision of the film and the message that’s trying to come out of the screen. Juan also agrees with Takeshi Kitano regarding the fact that “films are made in the editing room, not during the filming process” although he knows that what happens on set is very important too. “I remember reading interviews with Kitano where he said that every time he would need to get some emotion from his actors he would try first, of course, with the camera facing the actor in order to film that emotion, but if it didn’t work after the second take he would just place the camera behind the actor because if not it would be a waste of time. He said that although he is not showing the actor’s face, if the scene is edited correctly that emotion would be there nevertheless. To me that was amazing.”

Juan comes from a music making background. After studying piano at two different conservatories for eight years from the age of 5, he changed to drums and played in several bands since he was 16, something that is still doing today. “I always had problems with singers and guitar players ever since I started playing punk, because most of the time all they want to do is to get all the attention, and some of the singers and guitar players I played with weren’t good enough to ask for all that attention, really. With actors, I found out, something similar happens. The viewer identifies with the actor and gets carried into the story if that identification occurs on an emotional level. And, of course, the viewer can best relate with those emotions when coming from the actor’s face, as we do in our everyday life, if the actor is doing his or her job correctly. That’s what a director needs from an actor, but sometimes that just doesn’t happen. I don’t see the placement of the camera behind the actor as a punishment or anything like it; I see it as a tool for me to be used depending on the situation. But at the same time you have to be careful with the message you could be giving because the actor is the one bringing to life what’s on your mind, so he or she

has a tough job ahead. There are very different ways of directing actors. Many actors talk about their experiences of working with directors like Michael Bay and Stephen Sommers as traumatic ones because, in Bay's case, he has too much money and, ergo, too many gadgets on set, so his attention is more focused on that aspect of filmmaking; and in Sommers' case because he has a huge amount of ideas but can't differentiate, and more important, communicate, which of those ideas are good for the film and which ones are bad. Some other directors like David Lynch, Mike Leigh or Sidney Lumet give a tremendous amount of freedom to their actors and always listen to their approach to the film in general and whatever specific scene they are filming at the moment. Even someone like Woody Allen, who has a very precise view of what goes and what doesn't go on screen in his films, gives the actors room to move and make suggestions. Of course, in my opinion these last four directors are some of the best that ever worked in filmmaking, so it's them whom I referred to when I started making films. To me, the actor's vision is really important, what he or she can add to the role besides what I have in mind for it. And that's why I'm lucky to work with people like Darren, Sheila and Kathy. They gave me so much input during the rehearsals that the characters changed in ways I wasn't expecting, and for the better; so I'm really glad I'm working with them."

So he works like a drummer, he organizes and keeps beating the rhythm on the people around him, and you can see that the people know what he is doing, but at the same time they all suggest other ways of getting to the result Juan has in mind. There's always room for improvement.

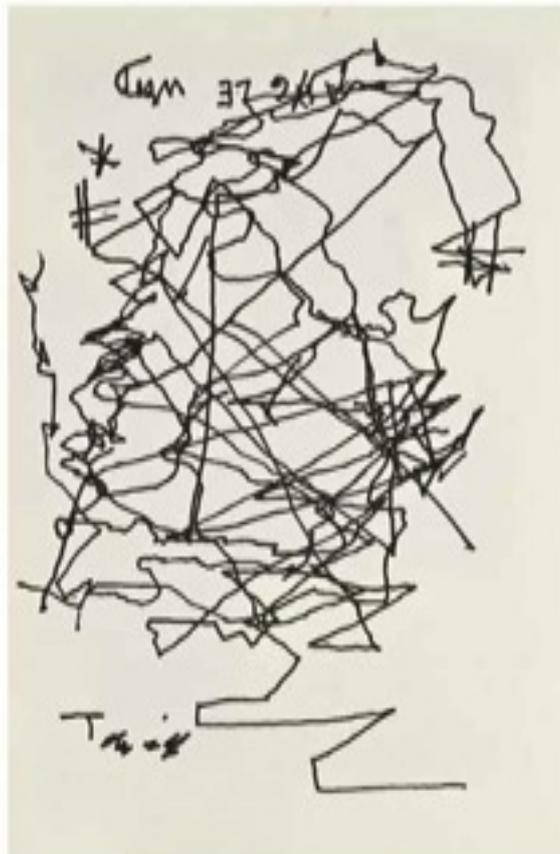
"I've always told the people working with me that they should say what they think. I can be a very practical person sometimes, but some other times I'm exactly the opposite so I have to (I want to) remain open to other ideas that could make us all work better, that can make the film better".

I ask him if that was the reason for placing the cameras almost on the floor and he starts answering by laughing, "That started as a joke. I was messing around with George, the cameraman, talking about some ridiculous 'art-shots', that's how we called them, from some films when they decide to go for unnecessarily complicated shots of feet or steps to try to show some emotions the character is going through without succeeding at all. George sat there trying a couple with Darren and one of them worked for the scene you just saw, so we tried it in rehearsals with the camera like that and we also decided to keep the water sound because of how repetitive and annoying it can be. With repetition the viewer gets different degrees of annoyance, or maybe none whatsoever, so we started playing with that possibility. There's also the fact that audiences relate more to people than to objects. I used to film things instead of persons in order to completely separate the audience from the film, and in black and white so it's further away from what a person experiences every day. I did this because I wanted the viewer to react and, eventually, leave the cinema unless they really liked what they were watching or were really stubborn. Now I start from a similar position, but maybe the reaction I'd like from the viewer to a particular emotion I'm looking for in the actor doesn't come from Darren's face sometimes but from the feet, the water, the lack of action.

Juan's film is about details. "I'm very interested in adding by taking out. That the viewer adds because of what's missing, that he or she is also interested in what goes on outside of the frame of the image and that the things not shown are as important, or even more, than the things shown." He says that he's a detail and a

number freak. *Klien* is a very small production based on his idea that it is possible to make cinema without too much money being involved. And the fact is that so far the production cost is below the 1000 euros and the estimated cost of the whole film is around 2000. He tells me that the most expensive short film he made so far was *Deiltvei* with a cost of 151 euros, 110 of which were spent in traveling to The Hague for some shots that didn't even make it into the final cut.

This film's production seems almost like a joke. With the premiere of James Cameron's *Avatar* last week, the most expensive digital film ever made at a cost of over 250 million euros, and with rainforest sequences taking 100 hours of rendering per frame working with 30.000 processors at the same time, *Klien's* schedule of two weeks of filming with two digital cameras and three microphones at a cost of a little over 2000 euros and edited with one desktop computer can be seen as almost ridiculous. If you add an eight-paged interview, the same amount that Cameron's film had in issue 244 of this very same magazine, and that it almost made it to this magazine cover, the ridiculous numbers become an irony, so I asked him about that. "If I think this is something of a postmodern film production because of the irony? No, I don't. Not in a strict sense, at least." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, postmodernism is 'a style and concept in the arts characterized by distrust of theories and ideologies and by the drawing of attention to conventions'. "When I was in my last year of studying, I told one of my teachers that I wanted to write my thesis as a work of fiction inspired by some of the stories written by Jorge Luis Borges, one of my favorite writers."



A Labyrinth drawn by an already blind Jorge Luis Borges around 1975, owned by barman and bookshop proprietor Burt Britton

“Borges wrote stories and essays, and some texts that are both things at the same time, and he baffled his critics because he was quoting and referring to authors that didn’t exist mixed with some that did exist, so besides creating his own universes in his short stories (a great example being ‘The library of Babel’ where he features infinity, labyrinths, (non) reality, different ways of reasoning and interpreting religion and religious views) and other universes within those universes, he populated them with actual and fictional characters and quotes, and he never explained any of his choices except by using even another layer of irony in his interviews. This teacher told me that Borges was a postmodern, and I never thought about it that way. To me postmodernism always implied something, in a way, negative; the idea of copying someone else’s idea and making it one’s own, and that had always made noise to me. It was when I started researching a bit more that I came across some examples of irony that were positive to me and I began grasping a bit more the idea behind postmodernism. In the sense of irony, and most likely in other senses too, Borges can be considered postmodern. In sense of irony, *Klien* can be seen as such too, but it’s not intended as such. This film is also self-referential in many ways. Does that make it postmodern? I don’t think so because I think it should have many more elements than just irony and self-reference; but I won’t deny it, because I think that that could turn up like Godard denying Debord’s influence in his films. I know that irony and sarcasm play an important role in my texts and films, but I can’t say until what extent that role is conscious or unconscious. In the end I want the audience to get their own meaning out of my work, and if that’s what’s coming out of it, then it’s fine.”

How can such a film exist and be successful? *Klien* has influences of Kitano and Alonso, Debord and Isou, Borges and Sokurov, Dada and Elementarism, Conceptual art and New Argentine Cinema; parts so dissimilar that end up making a whole that’s coherent and, maybe even more important for some, enjoyable.

Klien works because it can be seen as a very straightforward love story but at the same time it can be as complicated as each one of the persons in the audience. Some people won’t like it, of course, that is something that always happens. Nevertheless, the success of this film lays in the fact that it can be read in so many different ways that it could make people run away from the cinema, but it actually ties you up to your chair right until the end of it. The story being told keeps the viewer wondering about what the rest of the film will bring. From the very basic ‘is Sean going to be with Klien?’ which can make the film be seen as a romantic movie, or ‘who is Klien really?’ which can make this film a thriller, to ‘what is Klien?’ a question that continues even after leaving the cinema.

The answers are there, yes, but at the same time the questions still remain. The success of *Klien* lays on the fact that the same questions that the director asked at the very beginning of the film remain at its very end, but in a different way: it starts on screen and it continues, once the screen goes black, outside of it, in each one of us.

Andrea Cardell
ianerch@gmail.com

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Appendix

(a more in-depth bibliography, consulted sources and further viewing and reading)

This thesis is the product of over two years of study of different authors in the fields of film, literature and fine art and, also, of several essays written about their work.

The idea of this appendix is to give a more in-depth re-view of the most important of those sources in order to shed some light over how this thesis was influenced, how it took shape and how it was written.

One of the most influential sources is the work by **Jorge Luis Borges**. Besides being an admirer of his whole body of work, there are two specific aspects of his writings I took into consideration while writing this text: first, his use of the borders of essay and fiction (how he is able to still baffle critics and so-called experts today who still try to figure out which of the works and authors he is quoting are real and which aren't); and second, how he can set the tone of a tale and get the reader into it in the first two sentences of his stories (to quote him from the prologue of his book *Ficciones (Fictions)*: “*Laborious and impoverishing delirium the one of composing vast books; the one of spreading out in five hundred pages and idea whose perfect oral exhibition fits in few minutes. A better procedure is to simulate that those books already exist and to offer a summary, a commentary.*”

The original idea of this thesis, and several of my other works both in written word and moving image, derives from those two sentences.

I recommend the entirety of his work, but the two books most related to this thesis are the already mentioned *Ficciones* and *Historia universal de la infamia (A Universal History of Infamy)*.

Another very important author for the development of this thesis is **Guy Debord**. From his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, and subsequently his film, to the *Theory of the Dérive*, Debord's work has been an essential part of my theoretical studies for the last years. Films like *Howls for Sade* (his first film) showed me that filmmaking has enough ramifications to remain interesting in very different ways, even if it's a very young form of art, with just a little over 100 years of age (this same idea applies to **Isidore Isou's** *Venom and eternity*).

Debord's approach towards audiences (viewers and readers) is also something very important for me. A good example of this is his film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. I've read its script first and I then watched the film, and the first few lines were enough of a hook for me to keep on reading the whole text and several studies regarding it, and, of course, to watch the film (I consider both text and film masterworks) even though in my opinion that's exactly what he wanted from me, and I don't like it when I'm told what to do.

Debord was always confrontational, and ended up alone considering himself a failure regardless of having been one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. I find this situation most interesting. For some more information regarding this subject, I recommend an essay written by Alexander R. Galloway called

Debord's nostalgic algorithm that appeared in Culture Machine vol. 10 (2009), easy to find on the internet, that explains some of the reasons why Debord, when faced with his own failure, decided to retire to the countryside to develop a War game together with his wife, and some of the context and possible reasons of his suicide in 1994.

Two very important books for me that shaped my latest work in general and this text in particular are *Lipstick Traces* by Greil Markus, where a line connecting Dada, Lettrist International, Situationist International and the Punk movement in the 1970's is traced to show how 20th century culture developed in Europe (and then spread out to the rest of the world) leading to some of the most interesting part of the art movement nowadays. On another side of the spectrum, the book *Conceptual art and the politics of publicity* by Alexander Alberro is an excellent way of stepping into the Conceptual Art movement of the United States in the 1960's and 70's.

I think that to understand some of the decisions I made while writing this thesis, I'd recommend to start by the following films and filmmakers from the list of films already named in the consulted sources index.

Lisandro Alonso plays a very important part in my views as film director and writer, specially his first two films: *La libertad (Freedom)* and *Los muertos (The dead)*. The first film follows a day in the life of a woodcutter in the solitude of the Argentine Pampa; the second, the first day of a man out of prison. Both are very beautiful films, yes, and both show that film conventions can be bent and in some moments taken to extremes and still come out with incredible experiences for the audience.

Of course, I also recommend the films by Jean-Luc Godard. Being no expert on the subject, I came across them while studying Debord's work. I find it very interesting how Debord influenced Godard's work, although both of them are often seen as opposites. That kind of relationship can be found in some of my texts and films too, regarding my influences and my final work.

Last, but not least, I'd like to recommend the complete filmography of **Jim Jarmusch** and **Alexander Sokurov's** *Mother and son* for the way a story can be told and filmed; **José Luis Guerín's** *En la ciudad de Sylvia* because of how the whole film is built, from the reason for choosing Strasburg as setting to the almost absolute absence of dialogue in the whole film, with the exception of one scene, and how it's not felt at all as a burden during the almost 90 minutes that the feature lasts; and, finally, the films by **Takeshi Kitano**, specially his last three films (so-called 'suicidal' trilogy), the concept behind them as an essential idea in my work, and the fact that in order to watch those three films and fully grasp their idea and concept behind them, it's necessary to watch the whole filmography of the Japanese writer / painter / dancer / director first.

Of playing and cheating
from chair as chair as chair to a system

There's "chair as chair as chair" and then there's "art as idea as idea". But how? What happened in between those two titles, two phrases, two slogans? How did Kosuth go from one to the other? It's that space in between those two phrases that I'm interested in.

Joseph Kosuth (1945) made "One and three chairs" in 1965 (fig. 1) and it has been considered a work of conceptual art ever since: one actual chair in the middle of a photo of a chair and the dictionary definition of a chair.



fig.1 - "One and three chairs" © Adagp, Paris 2007

He said that it was chair as chair as chair and then he moved on, due to different reasons, to work only with words; and he became famous with those works.

One of his best known works is the "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)" series (fig. 2) where he exposed different dictionary definitions of words (like 'language', 'image', 'water', 'nothing', 'meaning', 'paint-less' and, of course, 'art') painted in white letters on black canvases hanging from the walls inside art galleries and museums.

Although in some ways a weak work because of reasons I'll explain later on, this series is also interesting to me because of my fascination with words. And also

because, to me, there are many things not told about this work and Kosuth's way of thinking that led him to its making. And because it occupies an important place in a branch of art which is all about concept and ideas (and, of course, because of the title the work carries) I think it deserves a thoughtful analysis.

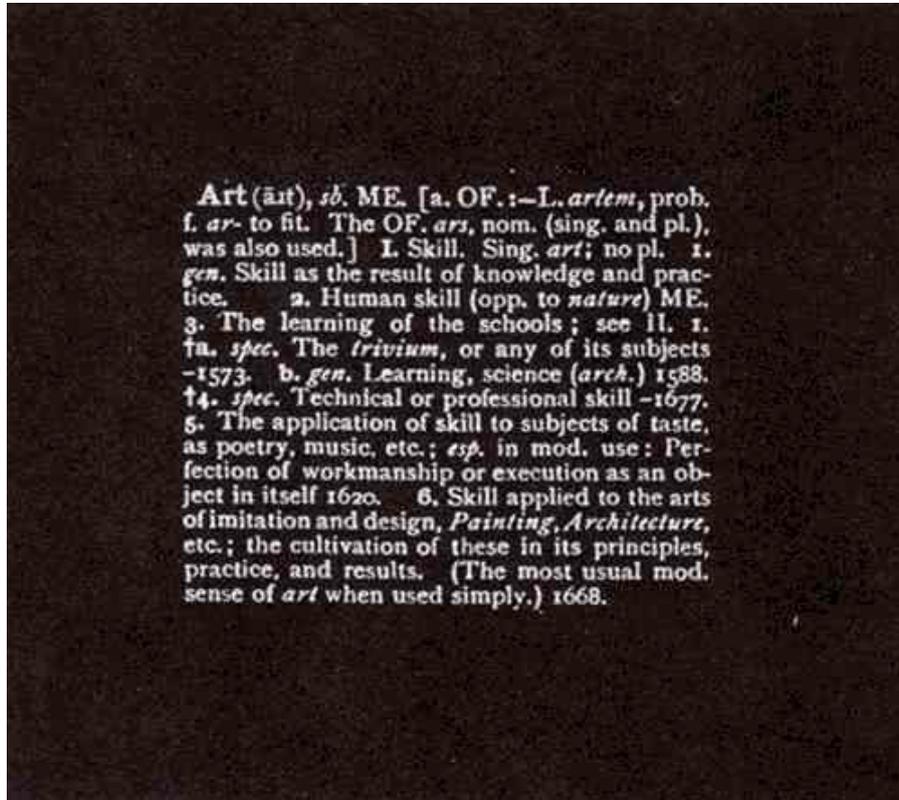


fig. 2 - "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)"

Critics, artists and Kosuth himself have said much about this series, thus that's not where I'd like to focus my attention. As I said before, I want to focus it in the space between "chair as chair as chair" and "art as idea as idea"; or, actually, "Art as Idea as Idea", with capital letters; because, as I would discover while reading about this work and conceptual art in general, every single detail of a conceptual artwork is incredibly important, even vital to its outcome and analysis.

In my own search for conceptualization and how to present things in space, I went from this:

Art as Idea as Idea

Art is Idea as Idea

Art as Idea is Idea

to this:

art	is	art	is	art
art	is	art	as	art
art	as	art	as	art
art	as	art	is	art
art	is	art	is	idea
art	is	art	as	idea
art	as	art	as	idea
art	as	art	is	idea
art	is	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	is	idea
art	is	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	is	idea
idea	is	art	is	art
idea	is	art	as	art
idea	as	art	as	art
idea	as	art	is	art
idea	is	art	is	idea
idea	is	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	is	idea
idea	is	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	is	idea
idea	is	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	is	idea

(fig. 3 - first table)

but how did I do that?

Taking as starting point that, to me, the title “Art as Idea as Idea” is arbitrary, I started looking for other options related to it. And that’s how I came with the other two possibilities: “Art is Idea as Idea” and “Art as Idea is Idea”.

At the same time, I was asking myself what would be the best way to present art in an exhibition space, and I was trying to figure out a way of presenting my own two titles in that space. What I came up with was to show those two titles on walls opposite to each other. In the first case (Art is Idea as Idea) my idea was to present six white canvases of the same size one next to the other on a white wall, with the title next to the last one. Opposite to this, my idea for the second title (Art as Idea is Idea) was to leave the wall empty and to put the title in a position diagonally opposite to the first one.

This way I would be able to say that in the case of Art is Idea as Idea, the idea of an empty-canvas-based work of art (with painting seen as the most traditional representation of what most people call “art” when they think of the word “art”) would trigger the idea of a painting even though there is nothing painted, but there are canvases. And in the case of Art as Idea is Idea, the absence of object but the presence of a title would suggest the “idea of art”.

My search being that the idea of art is more important than the art piece itself, this seemed like a good starting point of my research. But, of course, at the moment it wasn’t a starting point, it was an end point; but, again, of course, it wasn’t an end but just a starting point.

After leaving this idea bouncing in my mind for some time, I discovered that I was cheating because I could see all the randomness I saw in Kosuth gap (between chair as chair as chair and art as idea as idea) in my own choice (the gap from art as idea as idea to my two titles). I had chosen those two possibilities but I had left a lot of possibilities out of it. Even some I hadn’t even thought about. Why did I do that? What had happened with all the other possibilities and all the roads they could lead to? And, in the end, which are those other possibilities? After some hours of looking into this problem I came up with the first table (fig. 3): there were 32 possibilities. 29 more than Kosuth’s and mine together. What about them?

I thought, as I’ve been doing lately, that I should play a bit with that table to see where it would and could take me.

This way I came up, in order, with two other tables: a numerical one (fig. 4) and a tight one (fig. 5)

In the case of the numerical table, my fascination for numbers took over. Based on the system I used to replace all the letters for numbers in a story I’ve written some time ago, I switched the letters of the table for the corresponding number of each letter. This way I added a new layer of content (or, at the very least, form) on top of it. But in the end I realized that it would be impossible for the viewer to translate this information into words unless that person knew that I had also written a story completely in numbers and that the story has a code behind it. Thus I realized that I was asking that viewer to know this work, know its author, know that the same author had edited a book with a story written mostly in numbers, know that that story was written using a code so it could be decoded, and to know that that exact code was applicable to this work too. If not impossible, I presented the audience an extremely difficult task. But most importantly, I wasn’t presenting the original idea I was trying to present in the first place. I was playing. And I was cheating.

192	91	192	91	192
192	91	192	11	192
192	11	192	11	192
192	11	192	91	192
192	91	192	91	9451
192	91	192	11	9451
192	11	192	11	9451
192	11	192	91	9451
192	91	9451	91	192
192	91	9451	11	192
192	11	9451	11	192
192	11	9451	91	192
192	91	9451	91	9451
192	91	9451	11	9451
192	11	9451	11	9451
192	11	9451	91	9451
9451	91	192	91	192
9451	91	192	11	192
9451	11	192	11	192
9451	11	192	91	192
9451	91	192	91	9451
9451	91	192	11	9451
9451	11	192	11	9451
9451	11	192	91	9451
9451	91	9451	91	192
9451	91	9451	91	192
9451	11	9451	11	192
9451	11	9451	91	192
9451	91	9451	91	9451
9451	91	9451	11	9451
9451	11	9451	11	9451
9451	11	9451	91	9451

fig. 4 - numerical table

art	is	art	is	art
art	is	art	as	art
art	as	art	as	art
art	as	art	is	art
art	is	art	is	idea
art	is	art	as	idea
art	as	art	as	idea
art	as	art	is	idea
art	is	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	is	idea
art	is	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	is	idea
idea	is	art	is	art
idea	is	art	as	art
idea	as	art	as	art
idea	as	art	is	art
idea	is	art	is	idea
idea	is	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	is	idea
idea	is	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	is	idea
idea	is	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	is	idea

fig. 5 - tight table

With the tight table (fig. 5) I was trying to approach the table from the its form aspect: how to present it in space in the “best” way, the “most beautiful” way. I also realized that the table doesn’t work that way because, to begin with, the “table” aspect of it fades to the point of almost invisibility. Not because it stops being a table (it still looks very much like one) but because I could see that what I considered a vital aspect of the work was almost gone: showing the system.

art	is	art	is	art
art	is	art	as	art
art	as	art	as	art
art	as	art	is	art
art	is	art	is	idea
art	is	art	as	idea
art	as	art	as	idea
art	as	art	is	idea
art	is	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	is	idea
art	is	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	is	idea
idea	is	art	is	art
idea	is	art	as	art
idea	as	art	as	art
idea	as	art	is	art
idea	is	art	is	idea
idea	is	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	is	idea
idea	is	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	is	idea
idea	is	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	is	idea

fig. 6 - "5"

I realized, then, that at that moment (not before, and only half the time afterwards) it wasn't the title/slogan I was really interested in; it was the system (fig. 6).

I consulted an engineer friend of mine to help me come up with a formula to be absolutely sure that the possibilities were "only" 32, but he told me that there were so many variables to be added to the equation that I should trust my several hours of thinking. He checked the table, I triple checked it too, and we agreed that it was definitely the total amount.

At this point, I started thinking about a title. The system was in place and I needed to have some time off it. To this day I would still like to have the actual mathematical formula behind my choices because it would make a good title for the piece, a good playing title to be precise. In the end I decided for “5” as title, and that is because of two reasons. The first one being that talking with a teacher of mine she told me that all five pages of the reasoning (the three original title lines and the four tables) could be a five-pages-long mini book and I really liked the idea. The second reason was that the table has five columns. But both reasons were lies. Both reasons were based on my assumptions of what the audience would think about the work and where did the title come from: the obvious choices. My own reason was that there were 32 options, and $3+2 = 5$ (I carry that operation of reducing numbers to its minimum every time I see a number with more than one digit). This way, the title works in different levels: there are different reasons to have such a title, both coming from the audience and from me, and there’s also my own meaning that is almost hidden... It was a great choice.

So, then, how can I show it? There were two possibilities: several of the five-page-long book on a pile on the floor up to the height of more or less 1,5 meters; or only “5” on a wall printed in an A4 size.

The first way reminds me a lot of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and it gives the possibility of attaching to the piece one of the big words in art nowadays: interactivity. Basically, and to try to strip it from any beautiful packaging, the pile allows the audience to take the piece with them if so wished. It seemed a good possibility but it was not what I was looking for and it was also completely out of my budget.

The second possibility was indeed much cheaper and it had more to do with my original idea of the canvases on the walls. It also carries some risks, like the context it is shown in, what other works are presented next to it (if any), the fact that it can be prized for sale and more.

But, still, playing and cheating:

- Playing with the audience regarding the title(s)
- Playing with Kosuth’s work from the very instant I decided to show that he is cheating by having a gap between his two pieces (my own arbitrary decision) and by being arbitrary and using notions from psychology and philosophy (among other) to add at least one extra layer of “vagueness” to his work.
- Playing with the system, because my own choices are arbitrary too. The only reason why my chosen system has “only” 32 options is because I decided to keep the structural order of Kosuth’s “Art as Idea as Idea”: I kept the words “as” and “is” in the second and fourth column, and the words “art” and “idea” in the first, third and fifth. But why? There is yet another gap in that decision I made. The actual amount of possible combinations of four words (art, idea, is, as) is 256, and the number for four words in five columns is much bigger because each one should be repeated several times for each combination. So, in the end, as much as I think that Kosuth cheated, I am cheating too. Playing and cheating. Always.

And what about the next steps? Adding new steps towards showing “5” in public adds new steps to the equation of cheating (and, of course, playing):

- With or without the author’s name
- With or without the title
 - (and/or a combination of both)
- Only one on the wall or a pile on the floor
- Marked as part of a series or not
- Put on the wall by the artist, the curator, the owner of the exhibition space or a person not related to the art world
- The amount printed
- The amount that should be printed
- Can this idea be sold (like, for example, Siegelaub did)?
- How to price it?
- Does this idea infringe copyright? (to ask something completely irrelevant)

Will all these elements make a difference? Yes. Then when does it all stop? Whenever I want? Whenever the public wants? What should be left in and/or out? Who decides that? How many elements are inside and outside the work of art? Choices.