

TANYA LEIGHTON

ISSUE 64

DECEMBER 2012

# Art Review:

Contains 4% ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ; 3% JOHN AKOMFRAH;  
35% PANTONE 809; 7% JAMES RICHARDS & ED ATKINS; 1 MIAMI MELTDOWN

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## Alejandro Cesarco

*An artist reveals how to be contemporary and come to terms with art's history*

By Martin Herbert  
Portrait by Jack Pierson

In the opening scene of Alejandro Cesarco's five-part black-and-white 16mm film *Everness* (2008), a handsome young man sits beside a brimming bookcase, discoursing measuredly on the ideas of an unnamed literary thinker. The latter,

the figure onscreen tells us, defines tragedy as "the arrival of an enigmatic, supernatural message that the hero fails to fully and timely comprehend... for the person who has to decipher it, it's a life-and-death situation, something like having to understand a text under a death threat". The

scene switches: Caetano Veloso's *Maria Bethânia* (1971) spins on a turntable ("Please send me a letter/I wish to know things are getting better, better, better"), the singer's request now existentially enlarged. It switches again, to a scene adapted from James Joyce's short story 'The Dead' (1914). Our armchair critic reappears, sitting with his girlfriend in an elegant lounge. His interior monologue clarifies in voiceover that they're estranged, that she loves a now-dead former lover and that he cannot speak of it. Then another rotating record, this song funereal, and a final scene wherein the couple take breakfast in uneasy, honest silence.

If the 12-minute *Everness* exemplifies the thirty-seven-year-old New York-based, Uruguay-born artist's work – which also encompasses indexes, diagrams, photography, drawings, the sending of flowers – it's not only in its cool literary/cinematic deportment but in its compressing of roiling philosophic implication into tight contours. Attempts to voice our feelings, Cesarco's patchwork of borrowings suggests, invariably sieve through what we've seen, heard, read, and so we don't really express ourselves at all. (Even the work's title comes from a Jorge Luis Borges poem.) This, though, is only Cesarco's departure point. Email the artist and ask him to elaborate, as *ArtReview* did, and it's hard to decide if the undisclosed thinker in *Everness* would be Borges, whose stories sometimes involved messages only one person can read, or the artist, who goes a desolate step further:

"I think that a truly authentic, individual and original expression would be a completely hermetic utterance in an incomprehensible, unshared code," he writes back. "Our use of language, of any language, is always already mediated." That there are distressingly large cultural consequences to this is spelled out in *Zeide Isaac* (2009). Here Cesarco filmed his grandfather – a Holocaust

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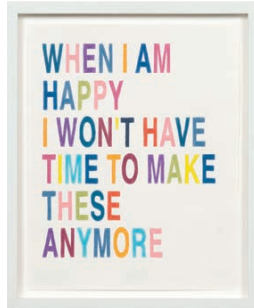






survivor – performing, he says, “a script that I wrote based on his personal story”. Testimony is shaped not only by events but also by prior testimony and by ideology, hence the consistency of Holocaust witnessing. To bear witness is to generate cultural memory – utterly necessary with regard to the atrocities of Nazism – but the witnessing itself, *Zeide Isaac* says, is imperfect. Time is no helper. In *Present Memory* (2010), Cesarco filmed his doctor father, recently diagnosed with cancer, in his practice in Montevideo, then screened the footage he’d shot in the room where he filmed it and refilmed that with a video camera, the explicit mediation turning his father soft-edged, prematurely ghostly; finally, Cesarco showed the same footage in three different sites in Tate Modern, visitors’ encounters and reencounters setting up a structure of remembering and anticipating that pivots around the fleeting present.

“Time and memory, as topics, are central to many of my works,” Cesarco concurs. “I think that time is ultimately a preoccupation with the ends of lives, in both senses: its purpose and the place of death. Memory is often described as both the object and the instrument of our desire. Memories, in this sense,



remind us of what we want.” And so *Present Memory* performs the bittersweet task of turning Cesarco’s father to memory while he still lives, for both the artist and his viewers. Again, coursing through this is the notion – and the psychic repercussions – of a flawed conveyance, a rift between how we represent something and how we feel inside. How to speak, knowing that our speech is defective?

Cesarco seemingly approached this gulf early in his career: in *Flowers* (2003) – a self-described ‘performance for a public of one’, memorialised in photographs of bouquets and flower-shop receipts – he sent flowers to ten women artists and authors including Roni Horn, Vija Celmins, Lynne Tillman, Yoko Ono and Sherrie Levine. The last figure, a pioneer of appropriation art, seemed a particularly fitting choice – to send flowers being at once to express yourself and to adopt a common cultural language – though at the same time, Cesarco has written, the project was intended as ‘a way of making someone happy’. (Happiness is an elusive but much-pursued state in his art: see his series of modularly multicoloured, would-be serotonin-boosting text drawings, *When I Am Happy* (2002–), which read, ‘When I am happy I won’t have time to make these anymore.’)

In 2006 Cesarco was mentored by John Baldessari, under the auspices of the Rolex Mentor and

Protégé Arts Initiative award, and collaborated with him on *Retrospective (With John Baldessari)* (2007), a series of screenprints that, modifying the droll elder conceptualist’s censoring style, blanked entire pages of text in bright block colour except for circles containing numbers, which corresponded to footnotes at the bottom of each page, below which was an additional text, crookedly conversing with the footers. ‘11. A strategy for renewing the possibility of what was – that which is impossible by definition, the past,’ read one, followed by the phrase ‘It is better to be a has-been than a never-was’.

“I think art is, in many ways, a form of art history, a way of furthering a dialogue with the past,” Cesarco says of this work. That dialogue is double-edged. As much as we might want to inhabit the past, voices from it skew and colour the present: it’s hard to say exactly who is speaking in *Retrospective*, just as it was when, for *Broodthaers* (2008), he reproduced the stationery that Marcel Broodthaers produced for his 1969 *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*. A repurposed utterance can, in Cesarco’s hands, at once reflect sincere feeling and stereotype it, as in *Us* (2008), a photograph of a found tablecloth with place settings labelled ‘moi’ and ‘toi’: ‘A visualisation’, according to notes on his gallery’s website, ‘of the classic trope of lover, beloved and the space between them.’

“I THINK ART IS,  
IN MANY WAYS,  
A FORM OF ART  
HISTORY, A WAY  
OF FURTHERING  
A DIALOGUE  
WITH THE PAST”



The space between things is more important than those things.

It’s worth noting, though, that for all the figured melancholy and dramatising of flawed intersubjectivity in his projects, Cesarco’s practice seeks to be not fatalistic but purposeful. “When the reference is most apparent,” he says of his explicit borrowings, “when a source text is at the forefront of the work – as in the film *The Two Stories* (2009), which retells a story by Uruguayan author Felisberto Hernández, and *India Song* (2006), which uses establishing shots from Marguerite Duras’s 1975 film – it is done with the intention of transforming discursive practice through repetition. A text is retold and allowed to perform differently. I believe, of course, that difference is created in these acts of repetition, in these ‘creative infidelities’, as Borges would name them, at the time of translating, adapting, borrowing and re-presenting a previous text.”

Diversely expressed, this pervasive sense of striving towards something while apprehending the complications within the effort is the hallmark of Cesarco’s work. For *Index (A Reading)* (2008), he created ten pagelike c-prints representing an extensive alphabetised index, of the type that might be found at the end of a book, mapping intellectual and emotional interests. You might anticipate that the ‘B’ section would enfold Roland Barthes, John Baldessari, Walter Benjamin and ‘Bloom, Harold, 50; *The Anxiety of Influence*, 165’, and that the lengthiest subentries would fall under ‘memory’ and ‘reading’. But *Index* is a fiction of sorts – the appendix, Cesarco says,

this page, from left:  
*Present Memory*, 2010, HD video installation, colour, sound, 3 min (loop); *When I Am Happy Drawing* 19/02/06, 2006, colour pencil on paper, 29 x 23 cm (framed 33 x 27 cm); *Retrospective (With John Baldessari)*, 2007, silkscreen on aluminium, 122 x 91 cm

facing page, from top:  
*Index (A Reading)*, 2008 (installation view, Art Pace, San Antonio, 2010), digital c-prints, A–Z in ten panels, 76 x 61 cm each; *Index (A Reading)* (detail), 2008, digital c-prints, A–Z in ten panels, pgs. 223, 224, 76 x 61 cm

preceding pages:  
Five film stills from *Everness*, 2008, 16mm film transferred to digital, b/w, sound, 12 min (loop)



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## TANYA LEIGHTON

this page:  
*Methodology*, 2011, HD video  
installation, colour, sound,  
7 min (loop), two tripod stands,  
gator-board screen

facing page:  
*Four Modes of Experiencing  
Regret*, 2012, archival ink-jet  
print, 76 x 102 cm

all images:  
Courtesy Murray Guy, New York,  
and Tanya Leighton, Berlin



Four Modes of Experiencing Regret				
	<i>Romantic</i>	<i>Comic</i>	<i>Tragic</i>	<i>Ironic</i>
				
<i>View of Time</i>	Ahistorical: sudden, discontinuous leaps.	Cyclical: second chances.	Linear, irreversible.	Linear, or uselessly cyclical.
<i>Central Attitudes</i>	Belief in striving against obstacles. Belief in certainties and absolutes. Belief in progress, perfectibility and heroic rebirth following struggle.	Belief in progress, perfectibility.	Expectation of dangers, dilemmas, loss. Refusal to accept these facts. Belief in certainty and absolutes.	Expectation of dilemma, ambiguity, uncertainty, loss. Detached acceptance of these facts.
<i>Central Problem</i>	How to venture heroically.	How to maximize happiness and minimize pain.	How to avoid the worst fates.	How to gain some perspective.
<i>Nature of Obstacles</i>	External, controllable.	External, controllable.	Internal, uncontrollable.	Internal, uncontrollable.
<i>Preferred Solutions</i>	Action. Emotion. Fantasy.	Exercise of reason. Action.	Seeing the truth. Feeling the truth.	Seeing the truth. Accepting the truth.
<i>Outcome</i>	Triumph.	Happy resolution.	Irreparable loss.	Compromises, trade-offs, mixed blessings.

of "a book I haven't written and probably never will. In this case a romantic novel of sorts. A repetition of romantic archetypes and melodramatic clichés." (Eg, 'solitude, 52-54; and affinity with oneself, 169; need for vs. bitterness of ones loneliness, 200'.) What at first resembles self-exposure twists into a problematising of it. How well can we recognise ourselves, even with help? Look at *Four Modes of Experiencing Regret* (2012), an image/text chart that divides up into 'Romantic', 'Comic', 'Tragic' and 'Ironic', and you might find yourself – mine is the last-named, I'd say – and simultaneously feel narrowly typecast.

In Cesarco's superb recent show at Mumok, Vienna, *Four Modes...* took its place within, in Cesarco's words, "three constellations of work that have to do with secrecy, enigma and

regret". The first category includes *Methodology* (2011), previously shown in the Uruguayan Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale, a video (augmented by photographs) whose murmurous dialogue between a man and a woman revolves around a letter the content of which we, as viewers, are not privy to. The second takes up the conventions of crime fiction, involves photographs of flowers ostensibly found at crime scenes, a textual slideshow narrated by Lawrence Weiner and a set of footnotes on the wall, and, says Cesarco, equates "the reader/viewer with the detective, the crime with the text, and the author/artist with the criminal... in opposition to the multiplicity of meaning proposed by secrecy, the enigma is a game with only one solution". If, as Cesarco elaborates, the 'regret' sequence relates "to paths not taken,

a retrospective look at our choices and how our lives could ultimately be told as an exhaustion of possibilities", it's possible to see the trifecta of works as a tiered meditation on what it is and is not possible to know – and accommodating both the knowing and the not knowing – that might be ego-bruising and hopeful at once.

Equally, it's a clarification of Cesarco's self-possession as an artist, one who manages to fold the process of influence into the conceptual armature of his work, who can cross-pollinate clean-lined conceptualism and dancing notes of feeling, and whose work partakes of the cerebral clarity and design that characterises the work of Borges or Vladimir Nabokov or Alain Robbe-Grillet. If Cesarco's voice is interlaid, then, with those of others, he's uncommonly absolved given his

structural emphasising that, to some degree, that's the case for all of us; it's in the mindfulness of this and other limit conditions that one might, his art suggests, move forward. The 'S' department of Cesarco's *Index* includes entries for 'Saturn' and 'Sontag, Susan'. 'The mark of the Saturnine temperament', writes Sontag in her 1979 essay on Walter Benjamin, 'is the self-conscious and unforgiving relation to the self, which can never be taken for granted. The self is a text – it has to be deciphered... The self is a project, something to be built.' One hears Sontag's voice in Cesarco, but the reverse is also true.✶

Alejandro Cesarco: Words Applied to Wounds is on view at Murray Guy, New York, through 12 January