

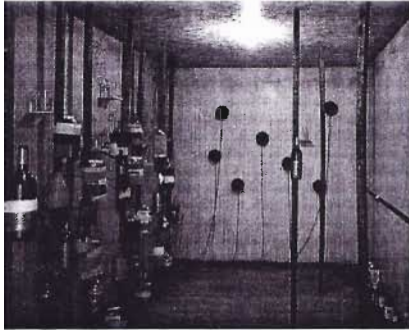
Germaine Koh, "Carlos Capelán" in *Crossings*
(Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1998), pp.102-107

The multiplicity of Carlos Capelán's installations is key to the way we should approach them. Within quiet, contained spaces, he compiles an array of "found" elements drawn from different cultures and traditions. These normally incommensurate phenomena, used with equal emphasis and without regard for category, include: the actions of drawing, collecting, and reading; symbolic objects such as earth and stones, books, maps, furniture, and fluids (milk, wine, Coca-Cola); assorted texts in their original languages written onto mud-painted walls; charged images such as the eye and the human figure; and atmospheres that hover between the institutional, the spiritual, and the domestic.

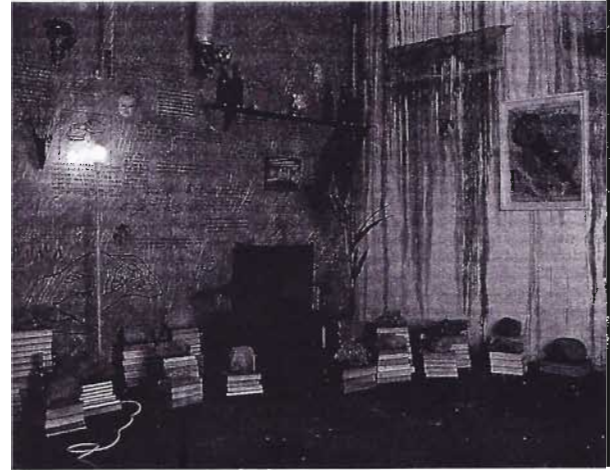


62. *La casa de la memoria* (The house of memory, 1997), details. Installation in three rooms in Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo, Badajoz, Spain

63. *A Painting Representing Space* (1997), detail of smaller room. Installation in two rooms at Miami Art Museum



64. *Maps and Landscapes (the living-room)* (1991-96). Installation at Reininghaus, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, Austria



By assembling these disparate signifiers, he invites critical and informed interpretation not just of the objects but also of the clash between their habitual uses.

We must make our own sense of the installations by engaging with these diverse customs and associations. There is no unified voice directing the viewer in Capelán's works; rather, their structural plurality reiterates the incongruity between the different cultural traditions and practices to which he refers.

Subjects in his work range from Latin American history to Amerindian rituals, Nordic mythology, and Eastern thought, and encompass myriad aspects: philosophical, anthropological, mystical, scientific, intimate, and "primitive." Furthermore, we each bring our own backgrounds to the viewing experience, so that while a work might convey information about the artist's own concerns, "the display is porous, and there is room for more memories than those of Capelán. There is an exchange with the viewer's memory and a coexistence with it."¹ In Capelán's words: "I don't think that we artists individually have to represent ... ethnic unity, or historical unity, or the unity of our minds.... Maybe what you'll get from me are only fragments. Now if you're trying to put the pieces together, they might make sense."²

In "The Death of the Author," a crucial formulation of postmodern textuality, Roland Barthes proposed that in this age the meaning of a work of art is determined not by its producer but by its audience, who bring to the work their knowledge of the existing customs and histories upon which it draws.³ The *authority* is dispersed. Capelán's work is a model for such a practice in which the birth of the active reader is made possible by the retreat of the author. Capelán asserts:

"I don't pay any attention to originality. I'm not trying to be original.... For me the process is the main thing. I'm trying to re-organise things which are already there. I am offering us a chance to re-write history, to re-read history, to re-interpret history, to relate ourselves to this context.... I'm trying to reconnect. Reconnecting things is more important than inventing new objects."⁴

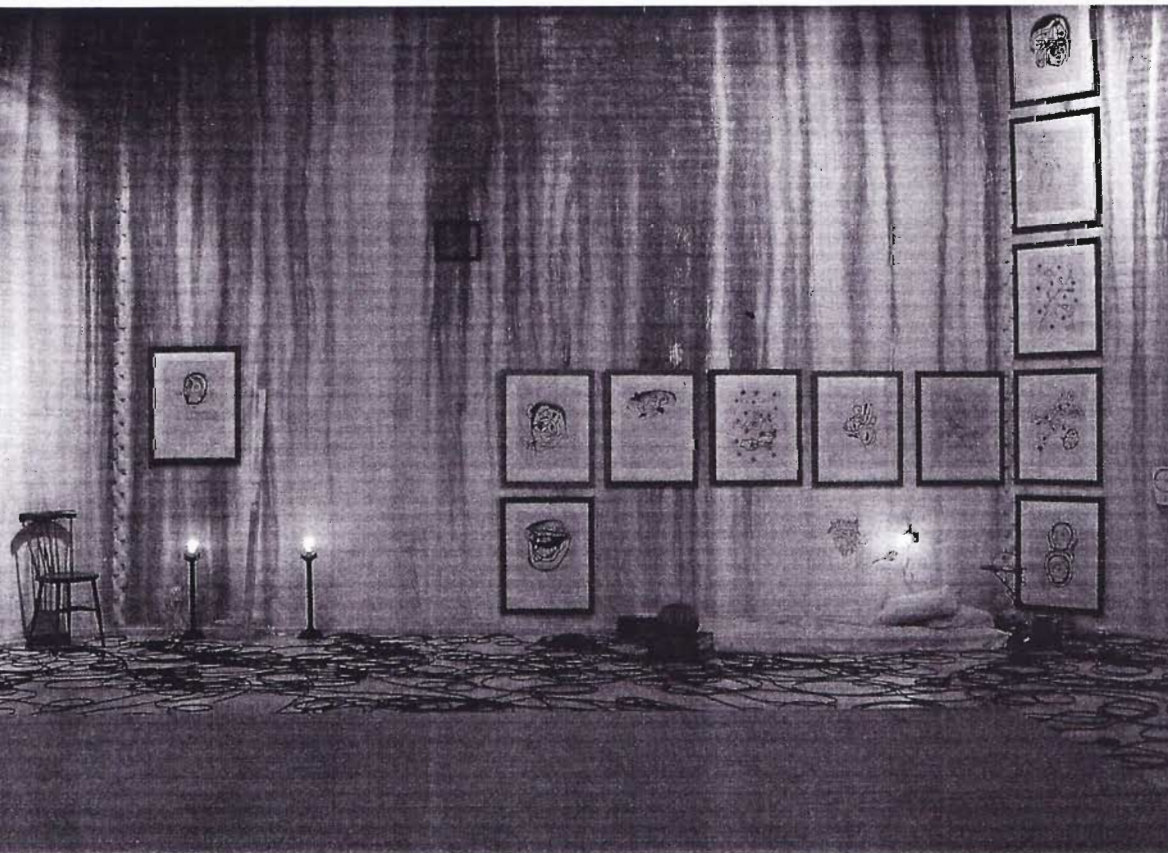
The result is "a dynamic, relational space, of conflict as much as of cohesion,"⁵ which relies on the audience to delve into it, both intellectually and physically, to begin to extract its meanings.

65. *Exhibition Room # 7* (1996).
Installation at Uppsala Konstmuseum, Sweden



In effect, the performative act of engaging multiple influences and sources parallels the formation of the artist's own subjectivity. Capelán's open and multi-faceted work has been claimed to represent a particularly Latin American background, but he is equally intimate, for example, with the Swedish

culture he has adopted and with the other traditions he inhabits. Strategically, he draws on the associations of both "primitive" and postmodern formations of identity: his work is centred on himself as a kind of shamanistic guide, but it is also exemplary of the decentred experience that characterizes the Latin American diaspora. Rachel Weiss has suggested that this apparently contradictory identity is actually to be expected: "The deep paradoxes in Capelán seem closely



66. *The dream of reason* (1996).
Installation at Kulturhuset Valfisken,
Simrishamn, Sweden

68. *Stepping out of the white cube (a little song for Johannesburg)* (1995), partial views of upper room (Part I). Installation in two parts at Museum Africa, Johannesburg

67. *Untitled* (1996). Mother's milk on paper



linked to his particular history and experience of exile, which brought him from Uruguay to Chile and eventually to Sweden.... These paradoxes are typical of the discontinuities, juxtapositions and simultaneities of contemporary 'hybridity'." 6 What the artist refers to as acts of "reactivating paralyzed languages" through ritual Weiss regards as impulses issuing from the "difficult panorama of loss which Capelán himself has had to tolerate."

The artist himself links the multi-layered experience cultivated in his work both to exile and to the enlightenment gained from traditional rites of passage: "The experience of exile implies the fact that you are seeing different levels of information.... For the so-called 'primitive' people, the rites of passage were mostly connected to the *experience* of exile, you know, keeping the young people, or the women, or the teenagers in isolated conditions, and they will go from one stage of knowledge or one stage of mind to another stage: it was a passage from one world to another."⁷ In Capelán's work, these worlds coexist. By connecting with diverse practices and balancing seemingly contradictory traditions, he deliberately escapes prescriptive definitions and confounds simple descriptions of his intentions or origins. Instead of neatly summarizing, one must give equal weight to his multiple lines of enquiry, honouring the complexity of his work by embracing its strategy of elusiveness. G.K.



Notes

1. Luis Camnitzer, "Carlos Capelán," *Carlos Capelán: Kartor och Landskap* (Lund, Sweden: Lunds Konsthall, 1992), p. 60.
2. Carlos Capelán in unpublished interview with Diana Nemiroff, National Gallery of Canada, October 1997.
3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image – Music – Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), pp. 142-48.
4. Carlos Capelán in interview with Gavin Jantjes, published in Jantjes with Rohini Malik, Steve Bury, and Gilane Tawadros, *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998), p. 38.
5. Gerardo Mosquera, "Carlos Capelán: The Eye Is Looking at You," trans. Hanka de Rhodes, *José Bedía, Carlos Capelán, Saint Clair Cemin* (Bogotá: Galería Fernando Quintana, 1995), p. 27. A related article appears as "Carlos Capelán: Texts and Spirits," *Third Text*, no. 26 (Spring 1994), pp. 43-47.
6. Rachel Weiss, "In the World with Carlos Capelán," *Carlos Capelán: Kartor och Landskap*, op. cit., pp. 42-43.
7. Capelán in Nemiroff interview, op. cit.

Additional Reading

Haber, Alicia. "Carlos Capelán: An Anthropological Formulation," *Art Nexus* (Jan-Mar 1993), pp. 211-13.

Selected Exhibitions

1998
**Mesotica III: Instalomesotica*, Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San José, Costa Rica (cat.)

1997

Galerie Monique Knowlton, New York

A painting representing space, New Work Series, Miami Art Museum of Dade County (cat.)

Die Welt als Vorstellung, Galerie Leger, Malmö, Sweden

La casa de la memoria, Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo, Badajoz, Spain (cat.)

**Algunas consideraciones sobre: la crisis de la representación... I Bienal Mercosur*, Museu de Arte, Porto Alegre, Brazil

**XIII^e Ateliers du FRAC* (Fonds régional d'art contemporain), Grand Café, Saint-Nazaire, France

1996

Lund's Cathedral, Lund, Sweden

**On Time*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm (cat.)

**Inclusion/Exclusion*, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, Austria (cat.)

**Five Gardens*, Kulturhuset Valfisken, Simrishamn; Ystads Konstmuseum, Ystad, Sweden (curated by Carlos Capelán) (cat.)

**Interzones*, Kulturforeningen, Copenhagen; Uppsala Konstmuseum, Sweden (cat.)

1995

Façade, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

**XI Mostra America*, Museu da Gravura, Curitiba, Brazil (cat.)

La Zitelle, Venice (cat.)

Galerie Leger, Malmö, Sweden

**Ist Kwangju Biennale*, Kwangju, Republic of Korea (cat.)

**Dialogues of Peace*, UN Jubilee Exhibition, Palais des Nations, Geneva (cat.)

**SITE Santa Fe*, New Mexico (cat.)

**Ist Johannesburg Biennale*, Johannesburg, South Africa (cat.)

1994

Carlos Capelán: Obra Reciente, Galería Fernando Quintana, Bogotá (cat.)

Galería Angel Romero, Madrid

**V Bienal de la Habana*, Havana (cat.)

1993

**Bedía och Capelán*, Kulturhuset, Stockholm (cat.)

Thanatocenos, Jacob Karpio Gallery, San José, Costa Rica

**In Fusion – New European Art*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, U.K.; Art Museum, Brighton; Oriol Gallery, Cardiff, Wales (cat.)

1992-94

**Ante América*, Banco de la República and Biblioteca L.A. Arango, Bogotá; Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas; Queens Museum of Art, New York; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas; Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San José, Costa Rica (cat.)

1992

Carlos Capelán: Kartor och Landskap, Lunds Konsthall, Lund, Sweden (cat.)

Mapas y Paisajes, Subte Municipal, Montevideo (cat.)

Galleri Hertz, Bremen, Germany

**America, Bride of the Sun – 500 Years of American Art*, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium (cat.)

1991

Galleri Mors Mössa, Göteborg, Sweden

Karte – Landschaft – Raummalerie, Galerie Basta, Hamburg, Germany

*Asterisk indicates group show; all others are solo exhibitions.