

## Syncopated Histories

Juan Ortiz-Apuy, a conceptual artist from Costa Rica and currently based in Montréal is, in essence, a theorist or cultural interpreter. His art is grounded in both the philosophy of twentieth century cultural theorists, such as Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek and the magical realism and literary experiments of such writers as Jorge Luis Borges, Alberto Manguel, Umberto Eco and Georges Perec. Indeed, the invitation and text about a previous exhibition of the artist's work, which took place at the MacLaren Art Centre, was printed on the back side of mind map linking all the cultural, theoretical, political and literary references that pervade his work. *A Map of the Empire of Language as a Place of Struggle*, (2011), reveals bridges between writers, rivers of knowledge systems and provinces of data, all of which figure prominently in his art practice.

No less ambitious, his exhibition for Eastern Edge brings together several different bodies of work, each of which speak to the relationship between systems of classification and methods for systemic disruption. For example, in his series *Fugues* (2011) Ortiz-Apuy begins by examining alternative organizational methods for knowledge. Fugues are built around the notion of counter point, which musically is both the act of combining and syncopating rhythms, and linguistically refers to the juxtaposition or contrast of discordant elements. Ortiz-Apuy builds on the theories of post-colonial theorist Edward Said, whose concept of the contrapuntal demonstrates the ways in which several voices or streams of knowledge can be conjoined without reaching a sense of harmony, emphasizing the uniqueness of each voice in contrast with other voices.

The fugue, as a visual key in Ortiz-Apuy's work, was chosen specifically because of the way Said talks about literary counterpoint. For Said, a novel can never be read entirely as a work of fiction that is separate from a real and lived history. The fugue represents a poetic resonance of a system of organization that, unlike the Dewey Decimal system, for example, is based on multiple vantage points. In his series *Fugues*, Ortiz-Apuy attempts to visualize alternative systems of knowledge management by creating bookshelves built on the concept of a fugue. These shelves are designed by reinterpreting pitch and note as measures of height and length. In turn, the shelves become literal interpretations of a musical score and also appear to be inversed library stacks. *Fugues* aims to demonstrate the ways in which everything is built on relationships, networks and connections between separate units. For the artist, in both this project and his hyper-personalized mind-map, finding the relational links between dissonant structures is important to understanding the larger picture.

In *Disruptions* (2010), a two channel syncopated video work loosely based on Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel", an unnamed character makes his way through a library, reshelving books by colour and other arbitrary systems. Ortiz-Apuy's library appears endless, similar to the way in which Borges imagined it. And again like Borges, in his blindness seemingly choosing books at random, Ortiz Apuy's character reshelves according to a hidden agenda. While this is a seemingly banal task, the books are also being reorganized thematically according to alternative and specifically anti-colonial structures. In this, the artist demonstrates that libraries, and also the university,

are contestable authorities and not definitive establishments of knowledge and power. In the video, the artist re-shelves several books, including Robinson Crusoe, a novel from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century about a shipwrecked British soldier and his dark-skinned companions on a remote island. By placing the novel in line with other books on the subject of colonialism, Ortiz-Apuy notes that Daniel Defoe's seminal story is as much a part of Colonial and Empirical history as it is a part of the history of literature. By showing that something can be read through multiple lenses, Ortiz-Apuy challenges the limitations that most authoritative systems place on knowledge.

Libraries, though they classify the world's data while tracking and, in effect, mapping out our exchanges with them, are ultimately, anonymous and ungovernable spaces. While they utilize tools of surveillance, they are not panoptic. They leave room for the type of dialogue Ortiz-Apuy is interested in having. As liminal spaces, hovering between public and private, the library and in turn, the university, remain in flux through their translatability. While they classify information, they are easily manipulated. What happens when you shelve one book next to another? What happens when you reshelve it? Libraries are not solitary, hollow spaces. Like the work of Juan Ortiz-Apuy, they require a reader to consider the links, to draw the bridges and to read the meanings.

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