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Reflections on the Painting of Alejandro Puente, the Notion of *Pathosformel* and the Recovery of Mortally Wounded Civilisations¹

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Translated by Hilary Macartney

For Luis Martín, my dear brother, assassinated by the tyranny, *in memoriam*.

1. Such are the difficulties of scholarship and tracing posed in the long term by the Warburgian category of the *Pathosformeln* that the time when a Mnemosyne Atlas of Euro-Atlantic civilisation and its classical roots, which is sufficiently exhaustive and complete, becomes available still seems a long way off.² Our problems are all the greater if we turn our attention towards non-European civilisations, and permit ourselves the indulgence of including within them those enormous and autonomous cultural configurations which range from the civilisations of India or China and Japan to those produced by pre-conquest American societies. We establish immediately that Warburg's major and obsessive finding on the central position of the nymph, as the privileged *Pathosformel* of the ancient Mediterranean and Renaissance and Modern Europe, which condenses and transmits the physico-emotional experience of the dynamism of a young life, that nothing less than this key discovery for the comprehension of historical European and modern American life is totally irrelevant within the horizons of the great civilisations of Asia. Even though the *topos* of the dancing girl in Hindu painting and sculpture could make us think of a certain relationship to Warburg's nymph, we soon realise that we are dealing with a different formal construction, which is dominated by the complex and sinuous intercrossing of the elements of a young woman's body, through a weaving which displays centripetal visual forces that are completely opposed to the centrifugal character of the gestures and movements of the nymph. The paradox, in the case of the dancing girl, is that her concentration functions in the manner of an emotional vector of a contemplative, and in the end ecstatic, experience of the sacred. There is, then, only a very weak or superficial relationship in form and meaning between the Indian dancer and the Greek nymph. If we explore the art history of China, there we certainly do not find any models representing a young woman which resemble in any way our famous Warburgian creature, even though a long-established formula of deep cultural significance does exist for the representation of girls as both tender and shrewd, reserved and delicately expressive. Clearly, to compose a *Pathosformel* of Sino-

¹ I am grateful to Lda. María Alba Bovisa for her critical reading of these pages. Her comments have been fundamental in correcting several of my errors of appreciation of pre-Hispanic art. In any case, if mistakes remain, they are entirely my own responsibility (or rather irresponsibility). With the express authorisation of María Alba, I have included some of her observations as footnotes to this work.

² Aby Warburg, *La Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico. Contributi alla storia della cultura*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1966, introductory study by Gertrud Bing. For global approaches or new discussions of Warburg's cultural theory, see E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography, with a Memoir on the History of the Library by F. Saxl*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1986, the first edition was published by the Warburg Institute, London, 1970; José Emilio Burucúa *et al.*, *Historia de las imágenes e historia de las ideas. La escuela de Aby Warburg*, Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1992; this volume contains two essays by Aby Warburg, chapters by Ernst Gombrich, Henri Frankfort, Frances Yates and Héctor Ciochini, and *ad hoc* contributions by Gabriela Siracusano, Laura Malosetti and Andrea Jáuregui; José Emilio Burucúa, *De Aby Warburg a Carlo Ginzburg: arte, historia, cultura*, Buenos Aires, FCE, 2003; Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, París, Les Éditions de Minuit, París, 2002.

Japanese civilisation of such images, the emotion transmitted would be located, to a certain extent, in the opposite points from that unleashed by the vision of the nymph: from the aristocrats of the Tang dynasty to the geishas of Utamaro and Eishi, the young girl of the Far East evokes, rather than the memory of the expansive, joyous or unbridled movement of adolescence, the mood of mental calm and concentration proper to domestic life, the daily chores of the palace or the house, and at most the secret and silent pleasures of love, judiciously executed.

When we look at pre-Hispanic American cultures, the distance of its representations seems even greater from that first *Pathosformel* which was fundamental in the historiographical construction of Warburg or any others which contributed to the inconclusive Mnemosyne Atlas of Euro-Atlantic civilisation. Naturally, the effect is more pronounced as we pass from the art of the Mesoamerican peoples to that of the Andean peoples, and in the course of this passage, we grasp that the prevalence of geometry in the figurative forms of the Andes is a decisive factor in the growing estrangement between the Warburgian theory of art and the culture we are experiencing, to such an point that we question whether perhaps the category of *Pathosformel* has any use within the new horizon of work. But our alarm (given that it is something more than a logical disorientation which worries us on similar occasions) turns almost to desperation when we come to realise that such evidence of the role of geometry and non-figuration in the crisis of epistemic validity of the *Pathosformeln* leads to a standstill if we try use them to analyse the art of the Euro-Atlantic avantgarde movements of the 20th century, for which the transcendence of transitive and figurative representations must be considered amongst its recurring aims. Thus, having reached this point, should we shelve the *Pathosformel* category and resign ourselves to a methodological relativism, in which that model would prevail, which would separate our examination of the arts in Euro-Atlantic civilisation between the Middle Ages and 1900 from the study of non-European civilisations, especially pre-Hispanic ones, and still more so, from the historical-aesthetic understanding of the avantgarde movements of the 20th century? We shall not admit defeat without further attempts. The work of Warburg and his followers in the Institute which bears his name has a historiographical solidity which well deserves the efforts on our part to analyse the problem of the applicability of the the *Pathosformel* beyond the cultural and temporal limits indicated.

It is possible that, if we transcend the plane of forms of representation and take note of the role of the emotional vectors of the *Pathosformeln*, we may confront the problem at a deeper level, and find a new base from which to project the category towards those areas of such difficulty. Because the basic configuration and the complex pairing of forms (representative until now) and meanings which, in contact with our sensibility, induce a psychic response of feelings and passions which is cultural and historically created, determined, conditioned, it is at the same time, and more than anything, a mechanism of memory. As I understand it, the perception of a *Pathosformel* integrates, in a fundamental way, the combination of practices and training through repetition, with which a society (a civilisation, in a 'macro' perspective) educates and trains its members, from an early age, in the perception and association of forms and meanings. The *Pathosformel* instals itself in the memory of individuals in a historical, delimited and precise time because, in an earlier period of the society to which they belong, this conglomerate of form and signification was constructed, exhibited, repeated and tested for efficacy in producing a collectively

shared emotion. And immediately after its first phase of installation, the perceptive-cognitive-emotional combination was used again and again throughout the history of that society or civilisation, so that, by extrapolation, it became admissible for the purpose to talk of a historical memory. In such a way, we have a hypothetical cultural object – the *Pathosformel* – whose origin, supported on either side by the individual memory and the collective memory, is situated in a fixed moment, before it then passes through the long periods of time and the undulating, metamorphic spaces in which a civilisation is unfolded. But we may return to the objective of our efforts, to hover between the arts of the pre-Hispanic Andean peoples and the abstract, geometric art of contemporary avantgarde movements. Perhaps it would be enough for us to discover on one side and the other of such a temporal, aesthetic and historical divide, representations which are now not only transitive, that is, biunivocally figurative of a reality outside themselves, but formal, significant configurations, suited to unleashing shared feelings and passions. In such a way, the emotional nuclei of those conglomerates, figurative or not, would recover historiographical value, which we could inventory and pursue throughout its modifications in time. We would have rediscovered the category of the *Pathosformel* in an earlier state than that of the primordially transitive representations. To begin with, therefore, we may attempt to search for elements which bring us closer to the reasonable application of our cognitive model in the understanding of pre-Hispanic Amerindian civilisations.

2. In the field of the theory of art and its historiography, the two millennia of development of the Mesoamerican cultures pose a central problem: where do we draw the boundary between iconography and ideographic writing, above all, starting with the first Mayan period? In other words, to what extent are the images linguistic signs or transitive representations, from the moment when anthropomorphic figures and animals, of the times of the Olmecs and Teotihuacán, present themselves to us covered in glyphs, or brandish and handle the ideograms as if they were instruments of work and war, or appear to turn into them as our gaze follows the flow of the lines, textures and details from the centre to the periphery of the forms?³ To take up our theme and complicate the question further, where would we place one or more

³ We come across similar dilemmas in Egyptian art and in Chinese or Japanese art, especially in their initial periods, when there was not a neat separation between ideograms and symbolic figures or representations (for example, in the palettes of the first Egyptian dynasty or in the bronzes and jades of dynasties prior to the Han). It is likely that the need to record with precision the pomp of the monarch and, at the same time, to consolidate the veneration of his person as the incarnation of the state finally produced the division between writing and figurative representation, even though there was never a neat split, as is proved by the episodes of destruction of the memory of certain pharaohs in Egypt (the faces and the cartouches with the names of the kings were then destroyed) and the primary aesthetic role which Sino-Japanese civilisation assigned to calligraphy. There are excellent treatments of this topic of the relationship between painting and writing within the context of Amerindian civilisations in Serge Gruzinski, *La colonización de lo imaginario. Sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español. Siglos XVI-XVIII*, México, FCE, 1991, pp. 15-76 (in the book *La guerra de las imágenes. De Cristóbal Colón a 'Blade Runner' (1492-2019)* [México, FCE, 1994, p. 60], Gruzinski also draws a parallel between the glyphs of the Nahuatl and Chinese ideographic writing); and in César Paternosto, 'Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm', in *Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm*, catalogue of the exhibition organised by the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Oct. 2001-Jan. 2002, pp. 55-56. On the other hand, remember that Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, author of a theory of the artistic image for strict application in the production of Christian iconography of the Counter Reformation in European and Catholic dominions on both sides of the Atlantic, founded his system of visual communication on an identity of origin between painting and writing; see Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane diviso in cinque libri*, Bologna, 1582, pp. 19 v. y 71 v. - 72 r.

possible *Pathosformeln*, once the iconographic motifs or *topoi* and the written signs had been identified and separated conceptually? For it is here that the glyph of *movement*, for example, which retained a consistent appearance from the Teotihuacán period to the post-Cortés Aztec period and which, in addition, served as the basis for making up composite *patterns* and very complex representations of scenes throughout the centuries, could well be confused with our formal-significant-emotional composite which we call *Pathosformel*. On the other hand, it would not be difficult either to superimpose the features common to various iconographic types of gods on an experimental *Pathosformel* of divinity. To my mind, for the sake of the functioning of our present category, we should separate, with even greater clarity than in the European case, the motifs that can be identified with a human character or a god (iconographic subject) from the glyphs and, above all, from our mnemonic conglomerates.

Thus, on the one hand, we have ideograms such as that of *movement* or that of *burned water*: in the first, the cycle of the ages and the rise of the Fifth Sun is synthesised in the form of two diverging arches, joined by the vertex, which is usually called the quincunx; in the second, a twisting form which alludes to the flowing of water is combined at the sides with a kind of fan whose points end in circles or spirals, representing tongues of fire. Such lineal combinations go beyond the stage of simple written signs: they are symbols of cosmological and religious notions, and it is in this capacity that they are inserted or projected onto the figures. But let us look at the latter figures, which represent in the transitive and reflexive senses of to represent. From the Teotihuacán period onwards, a process of increasing differentiation of the generally anthropomorphic divinities began, through their attributes, their clothing, their attitudes and, of course, the glyphs which accompanied them: Quetzalcóatl, or the deified hero;⁴ Xolotl, god of the wind; the Lord of the Dawn; Huitzilopochtli or the Fifth Sun; Tezcatlipoca, god of the smoking mirror; of all of these there exists a repertory of figures with which we can compile an iconographic dictionary of the Nahuatl and Mayan religions. On the other hand, almost all of them are based on a determined and repeated disposition of forms: a body of a man whose profile reveals the face, hands and legs, wearing a monumental headdress and dorsal crest made of feathers. We quickly establish that this same combination also usually represents, in Mayan sculpture of the ancient period and in the late Aztec codices, the priest and warrior king. In the end, therefore, it is not fanciful to assign to this already formal-significant composite an emotion that is powerful and immense, but readily limited to

⁴ Remember that, at Teotihuacán, Quetzalcóatl was also represented as the famous serpent covered in quetzal feathers and with jaguar teeth, without anthropomorphic elements. **Comment by María Alba Bovisio on this passage:** Concerning the possibility of establishing a 'dictionary', it should be taken into account that it is a process about which we cannot be certain from the time of the culture of Teotihuacán onwards, given that it comes down to us through the Aztecs (in the codices) and through the mediation of the Spanish (interpretation of the codices, compiling of myths), who placed a lot of emphasis on translating the idea of the Nahuatl god into Christian terms, univocally identifying the distinct deities according to their attributes and homologising them with Christian saints. Séjourné continued this task in her zeal to highlight the humanist character of Nahuatl culture (the reading she gives of Quetzalcoatl, for example, is marked with a Christian stamp which leads her to an, at times, distorted reading, in my view). For example, the attribute of the flayed skin does not correspond to one but to several gods who, on the other hand, are not always represented by it: Tlazoltéotl, the goddess of birth is always shown giving birth and may also carry a flayed skin, an attribute with which Xipe totec, 'the flayed', appears, in the same way as Tezcatlipoca, 'the smoking mirror', who has different manifestations: Tepeyollotl, Chalchiuotolin, etc. That is, more than univocal gods with fixed and exclusive attributes, complex divinities exist which combine various entities and can take on distinct forms within a defined repertory of attributes (clothing, tattoos, objects, etc.) and certainly the base is anthropomorphic but this I believe is part of a strategy of the Toltecs and not the Teotihuacans.

a concrete experience which is born out of contact with power, a mixture of dread and veneration, of fear and patience, of ambition and escape reflex, of seduction and hatred: let us call it the emotion of majesty.⁵ It is possible, then, that we have a *Pathosformel* peculiar to the great Mesoamerican cycle of civilisation: the *Pathosformel* of the powerful being (man, hero, god) which, at any rate, almost always has an anthropomorphic foundation, but which could also slide towards the metamorphic hybrid of the man animal, man-jaguar, man-serpent, man-eagle, and extend its dominion to the three worlds, earth, the subterranean world of the dead, and heaven.⁶

As soon as we move to the South-American Andean field, from Sechín and Chavín to the Tiahuanaco-Wari horizon, we have a *corpus* of images available, whose precipitate brings us towards the *Pathosformel* of the anthropomorphic powerful being, including the crown of monumental headdresses which we identified in Mesoamerica. Such is the similarity that Laurette Séjourné not only did not discount the possibility of a common cultural centre for pre-Hispanic societies of both hemispheres, but attempted to identify the origin and the links in the chains of transmission, which would hypothetically be: Chavín de Huántar in the north of Peru, and Tlatilco and La Venta in Mexico.⁷ Hence, in the hybrid beings of *El Lanzón*, in its anthropomorphised feline, would be found the *fons et origo* of the artistic forms of all America. Again, the emotional nucleus of this extended *Pathosformel* would reside in the affective and emotional memory of an experience of majesty. I wonder whether there might not be in this a proof of the potency of transmission and transmutation of the *ixiptla* and the *wa'ka*, which the American civilisations assigned to artistic images, and which, as Tom Cummins and Serge Gruzinski have demonstrated in a series of extraordinary works, would have been a force of the perceptive-imaginary state well

⁵ In his solid and immense study of the monumental sculpture of the goddess *Coatlicue*, Justino Fernández has also maintained that the emotion of majesty is the aesthetic effect which contact with this statue produces in us nowadays. Nevertheless, I believe that Justino is mistaken when he rejects the possibility of perceiving, by way of coincidence, in the sensation of majesty, a reconstruction of the artistic past which is historiographically valid. This is what I aim to achieve through my recourse to the *Pathosformel*. However, Fernández's text is rather ambiguous in this sense, as it appears to position itself almost on the threshold of a category which combines the emotional factor and historical perspective. I allow myself to cite the passage which best sums up the problem: 'In the last instance, what *Coatlicue* may be artistically, in the sense of beautiful, for us, and the reasons, motives or causes why she is, is immaterial to whether she was or was not for the Aztecs, and the reasons, motives and causes why she was or not. The beauty of *Coatlicue* for us lies not in what she signified for the Aztecs, whether this was beautiful or not for them, and is or is not for us. The beauty of *Coatlicue* for us lies in certain forms, of certain proportions, with certain aims, which we perceive in front of her, and in certain 'objects', motifs or symbols incorporated in her, just as certain forms, proportions and aims, all of which allow us to imagine, with support from history, literature and archaeology, some meanings which give sense to her formal beauty, revealing to us an intellectual image, finished and expressed in the thrilling forms of the sculpture, which are original and grandiose, taking into account the history of art. Majesty, grandeur and solemnity are the first concepts which occur on feeling the imposing presence of *Coatlicue*, on perceiving the serene calm of her monumental proportions. Seen from the front, the harmony of the masses which compose her cruciform outline impresses through its aplomb, which derives principally from the great vertical rectangle which forms the trunk [...].' (Justino Fernández, *Estética del Arte Mexicano. Coatlicue. El retablo de los Reyes. El Hombre*, México, UNAM, 1990, p. 146).

⁶ Laurette Séjourné, *Pensamiento y religión en el México Antiguo*; México, FCE, 1957, pp. 101-199. Jacques Soustelle, *El Universo de los Aztecas*, México, FCE, 1982.

⁷ Laurette Séjourné, *América Latina I Antiguas culturas precolombinas*, in *Historia Universal. Siglo veintiuno*, vol. 21, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1971, pp. 289-300.

understood by the conquistadors, rapidly translated and, consequently, placed in the service of the religion and power of the Europeans.⁸

Nevertheless, there are certain shades of Andean usage of the *Pathosformel* of majesty which are worth highlighting. In the first place, the hybrid beings often appear to be bearers of human masks, even though their silhouettes show them as essentially human, for example, the figures in the textiles of Paracas or the personages on the Gate of the Sun in Tiahuanaco. This peculiarity leads us to the second distinctive feature: more than an anthropomorphic base, some of the beings would have an inner animal structure – feline, serpent, condor or other bird, butterfly – and over it would have been fitted the human features of a mask (the examples coincide with those of the previous observation, although the being of the *Raimondi Stele* could also be included in the group). The third shade or deviation from our point of departure consists of the greater autonomy which the purely animal figuration appears to achieve (compensated by the astonishing realism of the human portraits on the Mochican vases, in an almost schizoid, and certainly very Warburgian framework of polarity), a representation which establishes a very intense formal-significant counterpoint to the anthropomorphic images on the ceramics and in the textile arts, from those produced by the Moche and Paracas cultures to those of the Inca empire.⁹ I

⁸ Tom Cummins, *Forms of Andean Colonial Towns, Free Will and Marriage*, copy kindly supplied by the author; ‘Let me See! Reading Is for Them: Colonial Andean Images and Objects “como es costumbre tener los caciques Señores”’, in Elizabeth Hill Boone & Tom Cummins, *Native Traditions and the Post-Conquest World*, Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998, pp. 91-148. Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes. De Cristóbal Colón a ‘Blade Runner’ (1492-2019)*, Mexico, FCE, 1994, especially pp. 60-62. **Comment by María Alba Bovisio on this passage:** It is very debatable, in my view, whether the notion of *wa’ka* and that of *ixiptla* can be considered equal; the question is very complex but, in principle, there is a key difference: the concept of *wa’ka* is inextricably linked to nature (vegetable, animal, atmospheric phenomena, etc.), *wa’ka* is a mountain, *wa’ka* is the god of a mythical tale, with the form of an anthropomorphic hero, *wa’ka* is a stone with peculiar features, *wa’ka* is a breech birth child, etc. This maddingly polymorphic concept always integrates different beings from a natural origin (*pacarina*); by contrast, the *ixiptla* is always anthropomorphic and is strongly associated with sacrifice and with the presence of the god through the human form: it is the priest who represents the god, it is the statue of the god, and it is the sacrificed person who is converted into the god at the moment of sacrifice. There are links between the two concepts but I believe that they have a specificity which we should not lose sight of for the sake of a deeper understanding of the respective systems of thought, and especially if we also want to come closer to the sphere of the emotional.

⁹ In the cluster of purely and completely anthropomorphic images, it is worth mentioning the so-called ‘suplicants’. These are human figures in the attitude of bending their torsos and directing their gaze upwards, carved in stone by artists of the Alamite culture in northwest Argentina between the 1st and 4th centuries of the Christian Era. Their similarity to the sculpture of Henry Moore is frankly astounding, and has reinforced other relationships between the pre-Hispanic art of the Andes and the art of the 20th-century avantgarde. José Antonio Pérez Gollán has articulated a very sound hypothesis concerning the character of representations of the ancestors, founders of a line and of a population, which would include the said ‘suplicants’ (J.A. Pérez Gollán, ‘Los Suplicantes: una cartografía social’, en *Temas de la Academia. Arte prehispánico: creación, desarrollo y persistencia*, Buenos Aires, Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2000, pp. 21-36). Could this, then, be the outline of a *Pathosformel* of the ancestor, which would have been displaced by the triumphant *Pathosformel* of the animal in movement, as Pérez Gollán suggested when he pointed out the substitution of the ‘suplicants’ by the images of the jaguar at the beginning of the 4th century AD and up to the Inca and Spanish conquests? **Comment by María Alba Bovisio on this passage:** I find it problematic to identify certain motifs in pre-Hispanic images which are still in process of being deciphered, especially in the case of the Andean images where we have no source which allows us to affirm that some configurations of the faces are ‘human masks’ (except in cases where the presence of these is verified in the archaeological register), ‘butterflies’, etc.; but this does not invalidate the character of the

wonder if there would not thus be a possibility of indicating a strange Andean *Pathosformel*, that of the animal as a sign of the dynamism and overwhelming force of life, an emotion which, perhaps, would not be so much implied by the synaesthetic effect of movement which the sinusoidal or broken lines (of crawling bodies, of claws, of feathers) would produce on the observer, but rather by the multiple chromatism which is common on the skin of the feline, the scales of the snake, the wings of the bird, and, *last but not least*, on the wings of butterflies which soar like an enormous fan of colours over the mouths and the foreheads of the figures painted on the ceramics of Nazca or sculpted like masks in Tiahuanaco.

But there remains a fourth point which must be central to our investigation from here onwards: the slide of Andean civilisation, in its Inca stage, towards a plastic art in which abstraction and geometry play a principal, and hitherto unknown role, enabled César Paternosto, in 1989,¹⁰ to put together a very attractive interpretation of Inca art, centred on the idea that what we call architecture or masonry of the Inca period ought to be considered the superior manifestation of a monumental abstract sculpture. Despite the high intellectual quality and the art historical scholarship which Paternosto demonstrated in his 1989 work, his approach does not, in my view, have the general validity which he attributes to it, so that it seems excessive to convert into a *clavis universalis* to understanding the art of the Incas this idea of a large-scale, abstract sculpture, in evident dialogue with the forms of nature (the mountains, the rivers, the plains, the sky). Even though there are indeed various specific constructions of particular relevance, due to the beauty of their execution and proportions, to which Paternosto's reading is applicable – the *Intiwatana* and the condor of the *Hurin* sector of Machu Pichu, the *Third Stone* of Saywite¹¹ and, perhaps, the Ollantaytambo block – I am afraid that much Inca architecture and sculpture escapes his categorisation. If we take two examples: on the one hand, the monolithic steps of the Mausoleum Tower of Machu Pichu, where it is difficult to separate practical functionality and an aesthetic peculiar to the architecture; on the other, the Saywite *Monolith* displays a high relief crawling with felines and reptiles in repose, in which, in an interplay of limited chromatic values – whites, a wide range of greys, blacks – a multiple representation of the *Pathosformel* of the animal sign of the movement of life reappears. We should say, however, that the latest contribution by Paternosto to the critical historiography of pre-Hispanic art, the essay which accompanies the exhibition which he organised at the end of 2001 at the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, lent further weight to the notion that there was a fundamental abstract paradigm in Amerindian art.¹² His new arguments and examples widen the range of artistic production covered by this idea, and comprise textiles and ceramics as well as architecture and sculpture, which were already considered in 1989, so that the chronology and cultural horizons are also extended to include the textiles of Wari and Chancay and the *keros* of Tiahuanaco. Paternosto refers to an

human-animal hybrid referred to here. What I am claiming is that, precisely in the case of the Paracas and Nazca iconography, the most important thing is this predominantly hybrid character (anthropo-zoomorphic hybrids or hybrids of animals) which dominates the iconography of the deities, beyond the fact that they are masks, costumes, etc.

¹⁰ César Paternosto, *Piedra abstracta. La escultura inca: una visión contemporánea*, Buenos Aires, FCE, 1989.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 125-126.

¹² César Paternosto, 'Abstraction [...]', *op.cit.*, pp. 13-111.

abstract art of painting, textiles¹³ and ceramics in Andean civilisation. All the art of the peoples of South America would thus have been dominated by the aesthetic pole of abstraction, which explains why so many of the plastic arts of the 20th century have seen in this millenarian Amerindian experience a model which needed to be explored, rediscovered and re-created. In a sequence of concatenated details, à la Ginsburg, Paternosto demonstrates the consummate knowledge which Paul Klee,¹⁴ Barnett Newman¹⁵ and other artists of the international avantgarde had of Andean painting and sculpture, at the same time as his research reinforces and brings new elements to the solid and well-known articulations which the Latin Americans Torres García,¹⁶ Libero Badii,¹⁷ Alejandro Puente¹⁸ and Paternosto himself, constructors of an abstract paradigm for the modern period of the subcontinent, succeeded in establishing in the pre-Hispanic tradition. As I see it, even without discounting the qualifications made to Paternosto's theory, his approach to the indigenous South American arts allow us to be persuaded of the fact that abstraction was, for them, a strong centre of gravity, although not the only one, in the long term.¹⁹ And so, having begun our enquiry in the field of the *Pathosformeln* of Andean civilisation, if we proceed with our analysis aimed at extrapolating the Warburgian category to artistic and cultural horizons where the limits of the transitivity of representations have been transcended, it may now be useful to attempt to probe simultaneously the abstract forms of pre-Hispanic South American art and the works of some of those modern abstract artists. The *Pathosformeln* thus deduced would be endowed, like the categorial construction of Aby Warburg, with an epistemological range that would be practically universal. For this purpose, let us choose the cases of Libero Badii, César Paternosto and, above all, Alejandro Puente.

3. In the 1950s, after a long voyage, begun in 1945, to northeastern Argentina, Bolivia and Peru, Libero Badii was one of the first artists of the Argentinian avantgarde whose aesthetic scheme took the history of the indigenous civilisations as the vital

¹³ Although it might seem almost an anachronism, if one takes into account that as early as 1900 Alois Riegl proposed, in his famous book *Stilfragen*, the abolition of any frontier or qualitative distinction between the fine or 'major' arts and the applied or 'minor' arts when studying the historical and aesthetic problems of style, Paternosto still felt obliged, and with reason, to break various lances in favour of overcoming those classifications, which retained only some socio-cultural sense, if it was really thus, in the romantic period. Two very important recent contributions on this programme, which goes from Riegl to Gombrich (see E.H.Gombrich, *El sentido de Orden. Estudio sobre la psicología de las artes decorativas* [1979], Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 1980) and to Paternosto, both located in the field of studies of pre-Hispanic art and its *Nachleben* in the present, are: María Alba Bovisio, *Algo más sobre una vieja cuestión: 'Arte' ¿vs.? 'Artesanías'*, Buenos Aires, FIAAR, 2002; and Ana María Llamazares & Carlos Martínez Sarasola, *Diseños indígenas en el arte. Textil de Santiago del Estero*, Buenos Aires, FIAAR, 2002.

¹⁴ César Paternosto, 'Abstraction [...]', *op.cit.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 80-84.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 74-80.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 90-93.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

¹⁹ The book by Alberto Rex González, *Arte precolombino en la Argentina. Introducción a su historia cultural*, Buenos Aires, Valero, 1977, continues to be a fundamental work for this discussion. A serious systematisation of the geometric and biomorphic motifs can be found in Alejandro Eduardo Fiadone, *El diseño indígena argentino. Una aproximación estética a la iconografía precolombina*, Buenos Aires, la marca, 2001.

starting point for his own production.²⁰ For him, this did not mean merely taking subjects or iconographic motifs from American antiquity, or even some isolated techniques, but reconstructing a form of sculptural work, a particular and defining relationship with the materials, a criterion of transitive and reflexive representation, a world of meanings, it's worth pointing out, an integral artistic-symbolic system, a *Nachleben der Antike*, we could say in Warburgian terms, but adapted to Badii's example. Of course, Libero's European training also contributed greatly to the process²¹, and from then on his sculptures came to symbolise a perennial conflict, always put into action by the volumes, the textures and, later on, the colours, but never resolved. Paternosto has pointed out two works, *The Mother* of 1957, and *Time* of 1957-58, which take up the confrontation, and in which, whether we consider them together in their polarity, or whether we view them separately, the clash of horizons and worlds of meanings is there.

The Mother is a pyramid with the pitch and profile of the monuments of Mesoamerica. The bronze has been cast as if it were a stone in which time, use and destruction by men had left cavernous holes. A trapezoidal prism forms the head of the woman, in which various marks are cut; some bulky forms, in the manner of the stones of Ollantaytambo, define the features. Whilst all this transfers a composite of architectonic images of the Mayan and Inca civilisations to a metal object, worked according to modern techniques of casting, and produces the *Nachleben* of American antiquity, the figure of the child, although its aspect might also be that of a pre-Hispanic monolith, superimposes on the group a clear evocation of the European *Pathosformel* of maternity. One might think there had been something shattering and inevitable in the labour of this mother, inseminated by a foreign conquistador. In contrast to this piece, *Time* starts from a European framework of production, seeking in the hyperboloid of revolution the means of representing non-Euclidian notions of space and relativist notions of time. It would be difficult to find an object of artistic craft more rooted in the Euro-Atlantic field of basic and advanced concepts of human experience. But even here, various gestures have insinuated the traces or the patina of the American into the highly polished and axially symmetric bronze body: on the one hand, the geometric signals of stars and constellations, which resurrect a magical-astrological contemplation of the sky; on the other, the same artificial corrosion of the block which we noticed in *The Mother*. But these imprints now no longer give rise to a sprouting of the European within the American, but on the contrary to the superimposition of the American on the European. Let us remember for the future something which unites these two works: the display of the material and the question that this raises regarding the process, that is, the evidence of the work as aesthetic decoy and dilemma.

At the end of the Sixties, Badii strengthened his reworkings of the American *Nachleben* by beginning a reflection on the concept of the 'sinister' ('siniestro'), which encapsulated for him the radical antipode of the 'classical' European system of the arts, at the same time as he was dedicating himself fully to reclaiming the use of wood and colour in sculpture. The former notion had probably already been expressed

²⁰ This link between Badii and the pre-Hispanic aesthetic has been treated by Nelly Perazzo in her article, 'Libero Badii y el arte precolombino', published in *Art Nexus*, no. 37, July-Sept. 2000, pp. 68-72.

²¹ The marble *Torrent* of 1953, for example, presents a double syntony with Brancusi's work and with the classical Greek sculpture of the pediments of the Parthenon.

by Libero in less distinct ways, but within his artistic practice it seems clear that the idea began to effect a militant inversion of the canons of sculptural design and figuration transmitted through European teaching. Hence his works such as *The Dolls* or the characters of *The Sacrifice* of 1971 tend to negate the effects of mass in his totems, which are almost reduced to one plane or one slender pole, synthesising the perception of volume by the stretching of cables or the formal analogies between the totem-doll and evoking the surfaces of textile or ceramic, by means of pure, intense, saturated, and generally primary tones, in clearly defined fields on the anthropomorphic bodies, which are flattened or reduced to a cylinder with a small base and long guideline. Although the contemplation of these polychromed beings is often joyous, so much so that we submerge ourselves unhesitatingly in their cheerful atmosphere, the proportions and the monumentality of the figures, the mysterious irradiation produced by the cables, or the representative device of the dots as eyes and stars joined together in constellations, are all factors which refer us to the *Pathosformel* of majesty outlined above. In the disenchanting context of industrial civilisation and its epigonal manifestations in Latin America, Badii's dolls and totems reinstate an experience of the power of *ixiptla* and *wa'ka* in the images, passed through the sieve of incredulity and irony of European modernity.

Another journey, through many of the same places which Libero Badii had visited, was made by César Paternosto in 1977, and reawakened the interest of this artist from La Plata in American artworks, and in pre-Hispanic aesthetics and civilisations. This development occurred under the influence of a perspective so wide and with such force that, from then on, Paternosto not only made his sculpture a constant exercise in the *Nachleben der Antike* in America, but also turned himself into an accomplished art historian and anthropologist, in order to give archeological, historical and theoretical support to his pictorial and cultural activities in the 'return to life' of Andean civilisation. The interesting thing about all of this is that César did not have to abandon his commitment to geometric abstraction, which he himself confessed had led, prior to 1977, 'to an extreme radicalisation'. On the contrary, Paternosto bound his recovery of Andean antiquity to one of the most powerful propensities which he discovered in its architecture, in its monumental statuary, in its textiles and in its ceramic design: the tendency, already mentioned, of the work of artistic forms towards a pure geometricisation. The aesthetic bond between the reconstructed memory of the past and contemporary practice of abstract art is found as much in a sculpture by Paternosto such as *Northeast Window*, which links architectonic fragments of Machu Pichu, of little Kenko or of the *Third Stone* of Saywite, as in his pictures such as *Pawqar* of 1978 or *Inti Raymi* of 1979, where the memory of the textile slips almost into a mimetic presence conveyed by the division of the canvas into two fields of colour, equal in area and scarcely separated by a shade of orange or of red, just as if it were a textile piece from the Andes, destined for the trousseau of a princess of high blood or the shroud of a powerful Inca.

Toqapu I of 1982, a square formed by four panels of canvas and painted in a mixture of acrylic and powdered marble, revolves around the mimetic evocation of the textile and makes it more vivid through the imitation of the material consistency of woollen threads, and of the changes in values and tones produced by the different saturation times of the dyes. However, the **pattern** achieved with the paint does not reproduce, but rather transmutes the chromatic formulas of the ancient textile, by emphasising the contrast between the slender rectangles, on which are arranged the sections of

*greatest relative luminosity of each panel, and the wide, dark rectangles of uniform colour. The metamorphosis of the **pattern** thus suggests a conflict between figure and background which is closer to a perception trained in the intricacies of European art. But this change also accentuates the simple and mysterious play of sparkles on the whole surface, and so encourages our sensation of the ‘return to life’ of an optical and synaesthetic experience of the American past. The splendour and majesty of men and gods is restored, once the **Pathosformel** is stripped of elements derived from a transitive, lineal representation, and is concentrated within a pure chromaticity.*

Our intention to concentrate on the work of Alejandro Puente was due to several reasons: *first*, of course, to the quantitative and qualitative scope of his painting, which enables us to cover practically all the questions posed by our *Nachleben* of American Antiquity in the work of just one artist; *second*, to the opportunity we have in Buenos Aires to visit and analyse directly the majority of his works in Puente’s own collection and in various museums in the city; and *third*, to the fact that, although the aesthetic field in which Puente’s output is situated is absolutely comparable, in its power and the issues it deals with, to that of the works of Badii and Paternosto, there has as yet been no study of it of the type that already exists on those artists.²² I am aware of my debt to the perceptiveness of Professor Nelly Perazzo in this sense, as she has insisted on the need for a historical and critical analysis of the painting of Alejandro Puente to be made available, especially because of the importance which Nelly herself places on the process of permanent redefinition of ‘Latin American art in the age of globalisation’.²³

4/ Before his fundamental contact with the complex totality of Amerindian art, Puente had already felt in 1964 the contradictory need to move towards overcoming the ‘coldness’ (his own term) of concretism, without thereby abandoning the rigour and the technical sublimation of geometry. For several years, he explored the possibilities in this direction, which allowed him to use contrasts of vibrant colours (Alejandro was at that point following the theoretical teachings of Professor Cartier) and the invasion of three-dimensional space in *Modular Structures*, whose construction was based on the interaction of planes painted in one or two colours and arranged as dihedrons and

²² One important exception with respect to this historiographical gap is the monograph, brief but densely packed with ideas, which Fermín Fèvre dedicated to Puente, in the collection of ‘Pintores Argentinos del Siglo XX’, no. 57, published in Buenos Aires by the Centro Editor de América Latina in 1981. It is obvious that an expansion of this text to cover the last 20 years of our artist’s activity would be required. Also of interest for a critical revision are the comments by Aldo Pellegrini at the exhibition of Paternosto y Puente in the Galería Lirloy in Buenos Aires (October–November 1964), the little essay by Jorge Romero Brest which accompanied the exhibition of both these artists in the Galería Bonino in Buenos Aires (1966), the reflections by Susana Torre on the exhibition of Puente’s work in the Galería El Taller in Buenos Aires (1967), the commentary by Jorge López Anaya at Alejandro’s show in the Galería Ruth Benzacar in Buenos Aires (1992), and the text ‘Presencia y vestigios’, in such syntony with the ideas expressed in the present article, written by Guillermo Whitelow for the exhibition of Puente in the Fondo Nacional de las Artes (2002).

²³ See Nelly Perazzo & Alejandro Puente, ‘Arte prehispánico: una mirada actual’, in *Temas de la Academia [...]*, *op.cit.*, pp. 201–210; the quotation is on p. 209. Professor Perazzo has also treated, in a critical and scholarly way, Puente’s twofold relationship with the pre-Hispanic aesthetic and with the avantgarde in the article ‘Alejandro Puente, el arte como búsqueda y afirmación de una identidad regional’, published in *Art Nexus*, no. 34, October–December 1999, pp. 68–72. Even if it is true that these reflections of mine do not aspire to fill the gap referred to, they did at least intend to open the way towards a systematic monograph on our artist, which perhaps one day, I aspire to prepare and write with Professor Perazzo.

trihedrons in movement. In 1968, Puente moved to New York, where he had his ‘illumination of Vincennes’, paradoxically enough, since it was in the quintessential metropolis of the most overwhelming Euro-Atlantic modernity that our artist grasped the intense similarity in aesthetic form and significance between the pre-Hispanic *greca*s or stepped motifs of Andean art and the pure geometric figures of the international art, with which he was testing the means of transmitting emotions beyond the limits of concretism. From then on, the *greca* and its innumerable variations were never absent from Alejandro Puente’s pictures.

In Chancay of 1975 (figure 1), Puente quadrupled the greca within an indigo rhombus, so as to resemble the luminosity of a star in the dark firmament. The symmetrical replications of the stepped figures form a sort of pyramid and its reflection, which projects below the horizontal axis of the rhombus. The colours of the vertical segments of the pyramid oscillate constantly within the purple greys, the light or sky blues and the pinks. Through a chromatic mimesis, this range of colours highlights the symbolic relationship with the sky, which has already defined the form of the greca as a synthetic representation of the staircase. We are in the presence of the design and the figure which Warburg described, in his memoir of his journey to the land of the Hopi Indians, and identified with the practice itself and the emotions generated by the optical effect of the ascending movement produced by the greca.²⁴ The efficacy of the practice, the utility of contemplating the sky, and the physical, moral and cognitive ascent of individuals are all felt emotions which accompany the conceptual links induced by looking at the greca, and which then join together in the blaze of light and colour of the image.

Around 1978, to the lozenges and the *greca*s, organised according to the principles of Gestalt colour theory and its applications developed by the German Bauhaus and its continuators in the United States – Maholy Nagy, Itten, Albers – Puente added a completely new technique of placing colours on the surface of a picture which might appear, at first sight, to be linked to the Neo-Impressionist experiments by Seurat in his sketches for large compositions, but which in reality sought to achieve an optical effect similar to the feather art of Mesoamerica or the mosaics of butterfly wings which often covered the litters of the Incas or other objects with a high concentration of *wa’ka*.²⁵ The combination of *greca*s and texture imitating featherwork dominated his compositional aims, for example, in *Chicama* of 1978, in *Atacama* of 1979, and perhaps reached its culmination in *Cuismancú* of 1980.

Cuismancú showed the apotheosis of the luminous *greca*, symbol of the celestial staircase, without visible beginning or end, extended diagonally across the picture. The small brushstrokes, varying in direction and the load of pictorial material, values and tonality, from light orange to dark red, allude not only to feather art but to the play of light on the scales on the body of the ophidian. Thus, the *greca* represents the

²⁴ Aby M. Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995. Translation and interpretive essay by Michael P. Steinberg, pp. 1-55.

²⁵ With reference to this, see the doctoral thesis presented by Gabriela Siracusano, *Polvos y colores en la pintura colonial andina (siglos XVII y XVIII). Prácticas y representaciones del hacer, el saber y el poder*, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, 2002, unpublished (pp. 294-343).

*stair to the heavens, the bird that flies, and also the serpent that crawls on the earth and penetrates its depths: it is the elemental form of the **Pathosformel**, with which Amerindian civilisations, and now the painting of the *Nachleben* by Alejandro Puente, transmit the emotional nucleus, complex and schizophrenic, of man in communication with the heavens and with the immense force, often hostile and always terrible, of nature.²⁶ In plastic terms, the key to the formal-significant-emotive system which becomes the **Pathosformel**, therefore, is the technical mimesis of the feather mosaic.*

The semantic value of feather art is a discovery that neither we nor our contemporaries can lay claim to: aesthetic interpretations of this technique elucidating its symbolic associations date back to the 14th century, and confirm that we are not wide of the mark in suggesting a correlation between the artistic process and the categorisation of the *Pathosformel*. We cite two examples taken from the theoretical literature of the *Cinquecento* on representation and dreaming. The first is given by the well-known Cardinal Paleotti, in his note on the relationship between writing and painting. In his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* of 1582, Paleotti presented featherwork as a symbol of the polysemic power of images:

“[...] imitating in this the example of those who compose the images in the West Indies with bird feathers and knowing that, depending on the variations in the lighting, these feathers represent different colours, they are not content that the effect should occur only in the morning light, but they also want [these figures] to respond to the celestial body at midday, to that of the west, and also to the light of the lamps at night.”²⁷

A little earlier, in 1562, Gerolamo Cardano had adduced featherwork as proof in order to outline the most detailed simile of a hermeneutics of dreams. In his *Four Books Which Explain All Manner of Dreams According to the Book of Dreams of Synesius*, the Renaissance physician, magus and mathematician noted:

“[...] The Indians, for example, have the custom of making most beautiful reproductions with stones and feathers. And some of them have the ability to recognise immediately a well-known person in the image; others, by contrast, need more time and much reflection and still others, although they might be well-acquainted with the person signified, will never be able to make up their minds to recognise them in the image. From this it is evident up to what point the capacity for recognition is innate and when an interpreter is necessary. For no interpreter can be better than the dreamer himself, if he knows the art [...]”²⁸

Both quotations will be able to help us to identify the basic point of the emotional nucleus of this *Pathosformel* which is focused on the form as significant technique. In 1985, probably prompted by the need to take the problem of processes and materials to its limits, Puente went beyond the mimesis of featherwork and, in *Untitled I* and *II*, placed feathers directly on the pictorial surface (a hessian cloth in this case). He did

²⁶ Aby M. Warburg, *Images [...]. op.cit.*, pp. 35-54.

²⁷ Paleotti, *op.cit.*, p. 275 r.

²⁸ We have used the excellent Italian version of Cardano's text by Silvia Montiglio and Agnese Grieco, published by Marsilio in Venice in 1989: Gerolamo Cardano, *Sul Sonno e sul Sognare*, ed. Mauro Mancina & Agnese Grieco, which contains Book I of the treatise. Our quote is on p. 35.

this in such an extravagant way that he also transcended any possibility of transitive representation and momentary eclipse of the material, and it does not seem fanciful to attribute these aims too, to the use of that technique by Amerindian artists in pre-Hispanic and early colonial times. Of course, the *greca* still retained its role as privileged sign, in the middle of regal feathers, as in *Untitled II* (figure 2). And it could be said that it prevailed over the hypertrophy of the explicit feather matter, since *Alamito II* of 1985 and *Huincul* of 1986 returned to painting which used imitative *tratteggio*, and made the *greca* the principal protagonist of the image, symbol of the serpent, of the ray, of the animal or human tracks on the ground, of the staircase, and (something new which was just beginning to appear in *Huincul*) of the plan or section of a building raised by men on the earth.

Around 1989, without deviating from the idea of a technical mimesis in which the *tratteggio* (that is, working a brush loaded with liquid or creamy pigment over the canvas) imitates a pictorial process alien to the brush, Alejandro produced a change in the technical signifier, by replacing the imitation of the feather mosaic by an imitation of the Amerindian textile. The reversal reinforced the presence of the *greca*, as was inevitable, given the inextricable link between this plastic form and the textile art of the Andes, but at the same time, the *greca* became more refined, more subtle (see *Kathino*, 1989), or else accentuated its closeness to an architectural design (for example, in *Unku*, also 1989, from the Ponchos series, where the perfectly symmetrical zigzag of a band of red surrounds two dark blue outlines which frame two yellow squares, and the whole recalls the gates of some monumental entrance in Tiahuanaco or the Tahuantisuyu).

Haynúde, 1991, is a rectangle arranged on the vertical, like a carpet on the loom, of which just under half has been woven. The horizontal borders progress from the bottom towards the top: a homogenous black is followed by four bands divided into fields of contrasting tones, on which black and grey *greca*s appear alternately, forming a sort of symbolic script. The upper part of the rectangle is a white surface (we can assign it this colour, despite the greyish and pink *tratteggio* which runs across it) on which can be made out the pencil sketches for the geometric composition planned for it, still virgin canvas on which other bands of colour need to be applied some time, following the chromatic model which is shown in a small rectangle divided into four fields of two colours, one red and one blue, in lighter shades than those used on the bands already finished in the lower half of the piece. Everything indicates that the picture is a representation of the textile technique in progress, of its manual and plastic dilemmas, and of its symbolic potential, which approximates its signs to the ideograms. Perhaps one could also speculate, from the position of the black at the base, the white in the upper half, and the red-blue rectangle in the upper right vertex, with the idea that the textile imitated is, in turn, an abstract representation of the cosmos, from the lower world of the shade to the heavens, kingdom of the light, the rainbow and the sun. The **Pathosformel** of technique has thoroughly developed its significant and emotional polarity, since if, when it represented feather art it denoted the sacred trembling of man in the face of the challenges of the superior force of nature, once it represents textile art, it signals, in the first instance, the creative work of man, who has known how to dominate and put to his own use the resources which nature has to offer. Nevertheless, we cannot escape a schizophrenic consciousness, even if one pole prevails over the other, for on the one hand, the painting of the serpent-*greca*, the ray-*greca* implies establishing a distance, inserting a **Denkraum**

which permits us to dominate the threatening object, and on the other hand, the piece imitated on the loom portrays the sublime organisation of the universe, arranged in a series of steps.

Still in *Chacurus* of 1995, a very complex *greca* was split and joined up on either side of a large rectangle, divided by a vertical band of sky blue, in the manner of a series of fractals which it would soon be optically exhausting to multiply. But from 1996 onwards, the architectonic design in all its phases, from the plan to the sketches of proportions and the transverse and longitudinal sections, had to prevail in the pictures of Alejandro Puente. He achieved this at first by a direct form of mimesis of the procedures of the architect: that is to say, the picture, which was often on paper, could very easily be taken for the real plan of an invented building, for example, *Iruya* and *Yacoraita* of 1996, or *Pucay* of 1997. There too, he opened the way for a new field of the evocation and *Nachleben* of American antiquity, because those constructions represented imaginary pyramids in the Mayan lands of Monte Albán or the Anahuac. In a second phase, the architectural designs were superimposed and combined with imitations of textile art, with their *tratteggio*, their *greca*s, borders, bands and rectangular fields of uniform colours. Likewise, the titles of these canvases, *Casabindo* of 1997, *Uquíá* of 1998, *Yala* of 1998 (figure 3), indicate present-day districts and settlements in La Puna, or even, in the case of *Kalfucú* of 1997, Araucan toponyms from the extreme south of America, but the buildings depicted are unmistakably Mesoamerican (*Yala* shows a false vault and a triangular arch built in front of rows, in the manner of the Mayans of Palenque or Uxmal). And so, the hybridisation of textile and architectonic techniques referred to above, together with this mix of southern Andean names and of buildings of Yucatán and Mexico, put in play a synthesis of the memory of the Amerindian civilisations in the two hemispheres. We can also say that the suggestive inclusion of architecture is another synthetic variant, significant and emotional, of the *Pathosformel* of technique, because this highlighting of the architectonic represents the triumphant result of the competition between human work and creative nature in the tenacious permanence of stone, transfigured by the hand and mind of artists.

Uculla of 2000 is, in its dimensions (163 x 249 cm) (figure 4), as monumental as the ground plan and façade of the abstract and synthetic American building it represents. In its aspect of imitation of a piece of weaving, it also possesses, due to its size and the intensity of the colours, the character of Andean textile objects which are destined only for ceremonial or funerary use by royalty. The **Pathosformeln** of majesty and technique have come together to achieve a contradictory image of the present-day vitality of these images, and of the chromatically restored memory of mortally wounded civilisations. The *Nachleben* of our ancients in an experience coloured by artistic perception.

In conclusion, therefore, I ask myself if perhaps, in this process of concentration of the category of the *Pathosformel* in its emotional nucleus, rather than its representative dimension, we have not reached the furthest and most intimate limit conceivable of the aesthetic and the combination of form and significance, that is, colour. A *Pathosformel* of colour, then, generator of feelings of joy and exaltation, which unleashes the deprived perceptive contact with the world and with life: the yellow alludes to the ear of maize, and the morning and midday sun; the ochre to the earth; the red to the evening sun, and the blood of animals and men; the green and the

blue alternate and interchange between the water and the sky; the white and the black are ambivalent, bipolar, schizophrenic, for the first corresponds to the upper world during the day and to the colour of the dead, the second corresponds to the subterranean world and to the upper one during the night, and both are always the colours of the destruction of life and of the dwelling places of the gods, starry or radiantly transparent. The discoveries of Gabriela Siracusa relating to the character of *wa'ka*, which Andean civilisation attributed to the colours themselves, and which only in exceptional cases the conquistadors understood,²⁹ are a most important element in the evidence for our own thesis: ie. Alejandro Puento, throughout his artistic search of almost forty years, has reconstructed aesthetically, even in its most recondite and elusive manifestation (the *Pathosformel* of absolute colour), the memory of pre-Hispanic Amerindian civilisations, wounded, mutilated, disintegrated and bloodless.³⁰ Benjamin's paradox about works of art as simultaneous documents of civilisation and barbarity thus allows for interpretation according to the swing of the pendulum.³¹ The art of painting has not only reintegrated the memory of the dead and the assassinated of the past but, through its sensitive *Nachleben*, it also does them justice in the present.

Buenos Aires, 4 March 2003

²⁹ Gabriela Siracusano, *Polvos y colores...op.cit.*, pp. 323-343.

³⁰ John Ashbury illustrated Puento's general theory of painting with one sentence by our artist: '[...] **colour is the only element which possesses its own grammar and syntax. This makes the physical medium lose its importance.**' (*Le Monde*, 27 August 1970, p. 11). Cited in Rafael Cippolini (ed.), *Manifiestos argentinos. Políticas de lo visual 1900-2000*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2003, p. 44.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus*, Barcelona, Edhasa, 1971, p. 81.

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figure 1: Alejandro Puente, *Yayahuala*, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, 1978, Buenos Aires, private collection.

figure 2: Alejandro Puente, *Untitled*, feathers on jute, 40 x 30 cm, 1985, Buenos Aires, private collection.

figure 3: Alejandro Puente, *Yala*, acrylic on canvas, 130 x 100 cm, 1998, Buenos Aires, private collection.

figure 4: Alejandro Puente, *Uculla*, acrylic on canvas, 163 x 249 cm, 2000, Buenos Aires, private collection.