

Maria Loboda
The Plutonian House



Plutonian apocrypha

Unlike what the title might suggest, Maria Loboda's *Witch's Ladder* isn't something that can be climbed up and down. The feathers attached to the rope, which resemble steps, correspond to each of the spells proffered by a witch, who later hides the rope under the bed of the person she wants to cast a spell on, or else in a secret hiding place, where the rope cannot be discovered. Yet, in the context of the exhibition, this piece also suggests a practical function, by alluding to the rope used by thieves to break into underground tombs. In this sense, it also metaphorically connects the above-ground world to the subterranean world, the kingdom of the dead, the domain of Hades/Pluto. We should remember that, in Greek mythology, the distinction between the god of the underworld (Πλούτων) and the god of wealth (Πλούτος), was extremely subtle, so much so that the two were often assimilated. Significantly, Pluto was married to Persephone, daughter of Demeter and venerated along with her, mainly in the Eleusinian Mysteries, as the goddess protector of agriculture-- in other words, of the inexhaustible wealth that springs from the Earth, emerging from the underground world to the light. Persephone actually personifies the connection between the two worlds: When the daughter was abducted by Pluto and taken to the world of the dead, Demeter in her desperation, neglected the plantations, and men would have died of starvation if Zeus had not reached an agreement with Pluto: Persephone was to spend six months of the year on Earth, with her mother, and the other six in the underworld with Pluto. The eternal cycle of the seasons, life which renews itself from buried seeds, the moist fertility of the same land in which the dead sleep, the ancestral dream of rebirth: the myth of Pluto and Persephone synthesizes all of this. It could be that these themes are not evident or explicit in the enigmatic rope, which, silently wavering, welcomes visitors the *Plutonian House*, but it is in this world charged by the stratification of meanings and symbols, and more specifically by the constant tensions between opposing worlds and desires, that the backbone of the exhibition, and Maria Loboda's work in general, resides.

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Much of her work addresses stories and anecdotes appropriated from distinct fields, including literature, philosophy, folklore, alchemy, history, science and mythology. In some cases, her work utilizes everyday objects and materials, but the rich network of cultural relationships which the artist weaves together make it so they emerge as improvised in a distinct light, infused with a magical, enigmatic or outright mysterious aura. In other cases, she produces more conventional pieces, like sculptures, photos or even paintings, always characterized by an exact, precise beauty¹. Nevertheless, it is a somewhat anti-formalist beauty, in the sense that the core of her work never lies in its aesthetic appeal: like the Siren song, beauty in these pieces has the objective of luring observers into the potentially lethal realms where they actually take place, functioning, in the artists' words, "as a vessel for more sinister objectives"². One example of this is *Walldrawing (cyanide, arsenic, mercury, lead)*, from 2010: inspired by the *arts and crafts* movement, it was created by using poisonous pigments, just like those supposedly used by William Morris and others, and which are said to poison the very workers whom the movement intends to rescue from their alienated state. Suffice it say that, in most of Loboda's works, the references are chosen and utilized for their symbolic value, not necessarily because they are proven to be true or reliable. As a parallel to her body of work, it is as if the artist were gradually constructing an anthology of apocryphal legends, distorted myths, stories that are impossible to verify, but always suggestive and symbolic. In her exhibitions, the works function "like each one of the songs on an album, or like each of the chapters in a book"³. In this sense, *The Plutonian House*, her first solo exhibition in Brazil, is exemplary: there is a common thread which runs through each of the pieces, able to guide and facilitate understanding of the exhibition's general meaning, but each one of the pieces maintains a singular character, and in one way or the other, also begs to be decontextualized and understood in another light.

Thieves didn't need a rope to get in. Access to the secret chambers of the tomb of Tutankhamen was sealed by four walls, the first two were broken in the upper part, notably the left corner, the others lower down: the thieves got in and out by crouching⁴. The openings in Loboda's walls respect the originals exactly, but this literality ends up emphasizing the differences more than the analogies: the walls are disconnected, placed in the middle of the room, and do not impede anyone from passing; the almost total darkness of the real tomb is substituted by dim lighting; the great wealth envisioned by the thieves has evaporated. Apparently, the artist does not intend to reenact the original episode, something which would require a meticulous reconstruction of the settings, but rather to make tangible the emotions evoked by the story she has chosen to tell. Beyond its evident physical presence, Loboda's work has been noted as being eminently discursive, and, in one way or another, as elevating "materials, expressive of a certain weak semiotics, to language"⁵. It is also possible to argue that the materials are not elevated to the status of language, but instead utilized as poetic elements, that is, with the level of license and deviance which we are accustomed to finding in the specific realm of poetry, and not in the real, physical world. It is, in a

¹ About the formal quality of her work, Loboda said: "I don't want the viewer to fight the form, they should surrender to the seemingly harmonious structure, which may ultimately irritate and distress them once they find out the story behind it." Interview with Isobel Harbison and Caterina Riva, in *Oh, Wilderness*, Berlin, SternbergPress, 2012.

² Idem.

³ Statement by the artist in conversation with the author.

⁴ If they did get out. When, in late 1922, Howard Carter finally discovered the tomb he had been searching for incessantly for nearly a decade, in the midst of fabrics, broken jars, wicker baskets and overturned boxes, he also found a handful of gold rings wrapped in a handkerchief, presumably tossed aside by thieves in a desperate escape attempt.

⁵ Lars Bang Larsen, *Echo Boxing*, in *Oh, Wilderness*, cit.

way, the exact inversion of some exemplary practices of conceptual art in the late 1960s, like Lawrence Weiner's, for whom a statement (like, for instance: "A rubber ball thrown into the Niagara Falls") should be considered a work of art, independent of whether it will occur, or already has occurred at a certain moment⁶. While in the case of *Havoc in the Heavenly Kingdom* or pieces like *Witch's Ladder* or *The Grand Conjuraton of Lucifuge Rofocale* (2006)⁷, it might be said that what matters is their physical presence, regardless of whether they are claiming to be real or not. In other words, inverting Weiner's phrase, it is as if Loboda were showing us a rubber ball in the middle of a waterfall, while at the same time suggesting that no one has effectively thrown a ball into the Niagara Falls. It is in this sense, as well mentioned earlier, that the truthfulness of the stories appropriated and re-elaborated by the artist should be considered a secondary issue, because what matters is "only" that a story exists. Here, curiously, her poetics are perfectly synchronized with Weiner's. In a 1968 discussion in which he tried to explain and define the manner in which his work (and that of other conceptual artists from the era) differed from what, up until then, had been considered art, he stated: "Perhaps the art I make and the art the rest of the gentlemen sitting here make differs from previous art in that it relies upon information, whereas previously the art was just presented"⁸. Maria Loboda's art, apparently, is "just presented," in the sense that it possesses an undeniable physical, fascinating, or even off-putting presence, but it also relies on "information" to be understood. On the other hand, reinforcing the impression that everything in her work is simultaneously affirmed and debunked, the exhibition also features one piece that is almost invisible. *Movements that mattered* is based on a story told to the artist by an archaeologist friend: when building the Alhambra palace, the emirs of the Nasrid dynasty were said to have ordered precious stones to be hidden randomly inside the walls. The day on which the immense structure were to be abandoned and destroyed, the Nasrid's name would live on, revered as being of the greatest emirs who ever lived, so rich and powerful that he embedded precious stones on the insides of walls, knowing that no one would be able to see them. It is possible, therefore, that some of the walls of the *Plutonian House* hide countless precious stones. But, naturally, it is also possible that there is nothing there, beyond what we are able to see. What is not possible, yet again, is to know for certain what these things are like...

The photos in the series *Day for Night* portray two apparently opposite environments, the interior of a house and a forest, both taken over by an unnatural, irresistible night, as if the world as we know it had suddenly fallen over to Pluto's power. But of course, this is not how things really are: nature, even thus domesticated, is visible in all interior shots, while what appears to be a forest is really a carefully planned garden. And the pictures, as their title reveals, show an unreal night, created by using a filter which allows images captured during the day to be transformed into nocturnal visions. While in the narrative of the exhibition the most immediate reference is the permeability between day and night, or, metaphorically, between the worlds of the living and the dead, the undeniable reference is *La Nuit américaine* (1973), the celebrated film by François Truffaut, which follows the backstage events in the filming of a movie, and which was distributed in English-speaking countries with the title *Day for Night*. By depicting the ups and downs experienced by the directors, the actors and various professionals involved in making a film, Truffaut offers one of his most passionate declarations of love for cinema itself: in other words, he constructs a marvelous *mise en abyme*. As we all know, the expression *mise en abyme* is derived from the

⁶ In this respect, Weiner's best-known statement, first published in 1969, is: "1. The artist may construct the piece. / 2. The piece may be fabricated. / 3. The piece need not be built. / Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership".

⁷ In this installation, Loboda used just the materials which, according to a formula from the 14th century, combined in a certain way, were able to separate any couple of lovers.

⁸ Lawrence Weiner in *Art without space*, a symposium moderated by Seth Siegelaub, which also featured the participation of Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler and Joseph Kosuth, included in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, 1973, p. 130.

tradition of heraldry and consists of inserting, in the interior of a scene depicted on a shield, another shield, smaller in scale, upon which another scene, generally different from the main one, is, in turn, placed. In literature, the expression describes a simple, rhetorical device in which a secondary, circumscribed story is inserted into the main story, complementing it. In some cases, Hamlet being one celebrated example (in which there is a stage reenactment of the murder of the title character's father), it is a fragment or a summary stuck in the middle of the main story. In fact, the most logical, common practice is for the secondary image to be smaller than the main one, since it must necessarily fit inside. But it is also possible to conceive of an image that contains a second, repeated image, not at a smaller scale, but at exactly the same size, such that it completely covers the other-- like the map imagined by Borges in more than one of his short stories: "Let us imagine that a portion of the soil of England has been levelled off perfectly and that on it a cartographer traces a map of England. The job is perfect; there is no detail of the soil of England, no matter how minute, that is not registered on the map; everything has there its correspondence. This map, in such a case, should contain a map of the map, which should contain a map of the map of the map, and so on to infinity."⁹ This infinite imagined by Borges seems to open up behind each of Loboda's works, which, in order to be correctly understood, presuppose that the original story be inserted within the story of the work itself. What makes it different from a conventional *mise en abyme* is that, here, the main story is included in the secondary one: the desecration of Tutankhamen's tomb is inserted in *Havoc in the Heavenly Kingdom*, for example, rather than the other way around. In general, a *mise en abyme* has the function of distracting the attention of the observer or reader from the main narrative, allowing for the introduction of secondary or auxiliary episodes. In Loboda's work, on the other hand, the essential relationship between the apparently central element (that is, the object that is physically present in the exhibition) and the many narratives constructed out of the references evoked by the work reinforces the importance of these distractions for correctly interpreting said work. In this sense, it is no coincidence that this text is so clearly characterized by an unstable movement, constantly approximating and distancing itself from the works of art, in attempt to discuss the maximum amount of themes which they touch on. By even further distancing itself, right now, so much so that includes itself, and indirectly its author, in the realm of its analysis, the text places itself *en abyme* in order to more closely approach the works and the artist, who is also coherently included in the work. Her silhouette can be identified in some of the photos in *Day for Night*, but is in *The amateur* that Loboda more clearly places herself in the scene, utilizing the familiar image of the contents of a woman's purse, apparently turned over in a rush to find something and abandoned on top of a bed. Like names scrawled on walls in pencil or carved with knives by tourists, the objects on the bed point to the overall evidence that Maria Loboda, or someone who might be easily mistaken for her, was here. We can see what she left, but it is most likely that that precious object which she was searching for when dumping everything out onto the bed has disappeared forever, like the most valuable jewels from Tutankhamen's tomb, or the precious stones of the Alhambra...

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⁹ This excerpt is taken from *Partial Magic in the Quixote* (1949, later published in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*), but an analogous idea also appears in *Del rigor en la ciencia*, first published in 1946, and later included in *Collected Fictions*.