

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photos by Ruth Clark

# 18

## COMMENTARIES

# Gabriel Kuri

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## All probability resolves into form

Gabriel Kuri is one of the key figures of a generation of Mexican artists who have significantly enriched the language of modern sculpture. Kuri's approach, in common with contemporaries such as Damian Ortega and Abraham Cruzvillegas, has been to reimagine sculpture not as a discrete, static, unchanging object, but rather, as the dynamic expression of a relationship between material, action and thought. "In my work," Kuri says, "there is a circular motion between the stuff – the material – and the thoughts." For him, material is never separate from thought, and thought is not separate from material.

I remembered, several years ago, Gabriel Kuri's interest in the work of a Mexican newspaper photographer, Enrique Metinides. (Kuri was closely involved in the making of one of the very first exhibitions of the photographer's work within a contemporary art context) I wondered whether this unexpected fascination for a tabloid photojournalist, might cast any light on Kuri's own sculptural preoccupations.

Metinides worked for the Mexican popular press – in particular for the big-selling tabloid 'La Prensa' - from the late 1940s to his retirement in 1993. The context for his work was the 'Nota Roja' or Red Note, a section of the press dedicated to real-life crime and tragedy. For five decades, Metinides photographed infernos, floods, aeroplane crashes, car crashes, bus and train crashes, murders, accidents and suicides, all in and around his native Mexico City. His photographs were extraordinary for many reasons. Of short physical stature, and lacking anything high-tech like a telephoto lens, he was also working in an era before the general public had learnt codes of composure in front of the media. Consequently his compositions, and the way that his subjects interact with the camera, are very unusual to modern eyes. Metinides said, "Anyone can take the picture of the fire – the thing is to take the light of the flames upon the faces of the witnesses." For him, the 'event' was not the corpse or the crashed plane, it was the whole event, the impact of the accident on everything and everyone around it. It seems to me that there is a comparison to be drawn between Metinides' 'expanded' photographic events and Kuri's conception of sculpture, not as the object per se, but as the object in interaction with everything around it. Take *Items in Care of Items*, Kuri's

2008 piece for Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie in which he transposed the museum's cloakroom service into a late-modernist style steel sculpture set centre stage in the main gallery. Visitors checked in their belongings - coats, hats, prams and bags were strewn over the bright yellow planes of the sculpture - at the beginning of their visit, and collected them again at the end. Thus the piece was continually changing in shape and composition. 'Life' impacted on its form and material, just as conversely, its form impacted on 'life' in that moment.

I was thinking too about a recurring juxtaposition in Gabriel Kuri's recent work, the image of the voting booth, on the one hand, and the emergency shelter, on the other - those structures erected to deal with temporary homelessness in situations of disaster. He seems to be pointing to the similarity of structure, the similarity between how the material is formed in relation to these two very different events.<sup>1</sup>

And yet something is shared in disaster situations as well as democratic elections. People are brought together in public space regardless of who they are: we are made equal in that moment. I was reminded of the Slovenian theorist Renate Salecl: "Accidents bring together disparate micro-narratives in the megalopolis. People from various social orders are brought suddenly together in the experience."

The accident is about order thrown into chaos. Whereas the election is an attempt to bring order to chaos, it is about trying to shape the form of the future in a better way. Perhaps both can serve as metaphors for sculpture.

Enrique Metinides – at least when I visited him ten years ago – lived in seclusion in a small apartment in Mexico City, right next to a petrol station not dissimilar to the many he has photographed in flames. Seven small televisions and five video recorders were running constantly in his home. He lay in his bedroom scanning cable and satellite TV channels across the globe, searching from hurricanes, earthquakes, suicide bombings, landslides. When he found an event, he recorded it on a VHS video, which then joined a growing mountain of tapes piled in the house. Metinides' has a deep psychological attraction to chaos and catastrophe. Accidents and disasters disturb the order in the system. But his deeper impulse is to attempt to contain that chaos: to create a structure in which to store it. He gives a type of shape,

a filing system, to the disorder of the planet. I thought back to Gabriel Kuri. And his sculptural urge to give form and structure to material. This is perhaps an over-obvious thing to remark of his *Alignment* works – groups of everyday objects ordered in straight lines, in beautifully unexpected relationships. Then I thought of Kuri's invention of systems to generate durational sculpture, as in the Berlin piece, where he created a system that would allow the artwork to self-generate over time and a framework in which to contain the clutter of everyday stuff. I thought also of his interest in found objects designed to return order to life after catastrophe – emergency blankets, matches, fire extinguishers. In his installation at The Common Guild, these objects are lined up in a state of readiness, as if waiting for an accident to happen. Perhaps this is why he called this exhibition *All probability resolves into form*. Kuri once stated: "art is an arena of potential." Art, like the news, is full of potential, full of the unpredictable. Art gives form and structure to the unpredictable, just as Metinides discovered, the daily gathering of news gave some kind of meaning to the otherwise inexplicable.

Kate Bush

[1] Gabriel Kuri, *All probability resolves into form*,  
The Common Guild, 2014



Gabriel Kuri  
'untitled polling table', 2014  
Collapsible tables, painted metal dividers,  
donated toiletries and linen

Gabriel Kuri  
'untitled polling table', 2014 (detail)  
Collapsible tables, painted metal dividers,  
donated toiletries and linen

Gabriel Kuri  
'Balance of the invisible and the foreseeable', 2014  
Powder coated metal, donated sleeping bags

