Hans-Michael Herzog in conversation
with Guillermo Kuitca

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Hans-Michael Herzog: How did it all start in your life with art? Why? When? Was it a slow development or not? Why start painting? Why start drawing? What was your situation like?

Guillermo Kuitca: I have to go back to when I was very small. It is rare for me to have memories in which I wasn’t painting. I started painting, like many kids, in kindergarten. At that time I painted very colourful paintings with clowns, apparently one of the teachers told my parents that I had a capacity or talent for painting. They accepted that and took me to the free expression workshops which were around in Argentina then — I’m talking about the late 1960s. In a modern Argentina and with some educational intent to give freedom to the kids, those workshops were places where you went just to paint, without any instructions. I felt at ease and enjoyed painting. Afterwards I started to see shows, to go to museums, especially to the Museo de Bellas Artes. Sometimes I went with my father on Saturday mornings to see galleries in Calle Florida, in those days they were all there, nowadays there aren’t many left, and sometimes I went with my mother to see a show during the week. When I was nine I became restless, as my parents describe it, to find a more rigorous training. That was when they contacted Ahuva Szlimowicz, who was to be my teacher throughout almost the entirety of my training, who was a surrealist artist, trained in the tradition of Batlle Planas, an Argentinean surrealist painter. Ahuva was a great teacher, probably more limited as a painter, but she was a very curious woman, with a very bright, very keen eye. They put me in her hands. At the time I was very serious about the question of art because at the age of ten I already saw myself as a painter. As time went on, I revised my personal opinion, which is bound to be coloured by the way we think about ourselves, and then I thought that I had no talent but was a very timid, withdrawn kid, a bit insecure and very lacking in concentration. When I painted, all that was turned into something else. Face to face with a sheet of paper and paints I had a connection that I didn’t manage to achieve with other things, at best my talent was no more than the signal for
them to say: ‘Well, this kid needs to concentrate somehow.’ Anyhow, in Ahuva’s workshop I carried on with my free work, though with a few more instructions, though not many. Generally within the field of abstract art. I didn’t work on any type of representation of anything. In Argentina, or at least in Buenos Aires, at that time people spoke badly about the Schools of Fine Art. That didn’t change.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** But sometimes they are bad, aren’t they?

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Sometimes they are really bad. If you ask yourself why the tradition of workshops in Argentina is so important, why artists end up training in the workshops, it has a lot to do with what people were saying, at least in the 1960s and 1970s, that the School of Fine Art would frustrate a person’s vocation. So luckily, my parents didn’t put pressure on me to go to the School of Fine Arts. I suppose they were a bit worried that I would be left without any academic or formal training, because I never had one. Fortunately Ahuva was very adamant that I should not go to study in the School of Fine Arts, and I didn’t go.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** It’s often better to stay away.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** So I never crossed the threshold of the school, not even as a visitor. As the matter became more and more serious, at the age of thirteen I decided — though Ahuva and my parents supported me in this — to put on my first show. So my father and I had many talks with various galleries, but none of them would allow me to hold an exhibition because they were afraid of what might happen to someone as young as I was, and they said that holding an exhibition at that age would be the end of my career. I received many warnings that it was a very bad idea, that I should wait longer, even when they liked the work. They all said that the work could certainly be shown, but that I wasn’t mature enough yet, which was probably true. It all got me into heated discussions and I felt an anger that upset me. I remember that when I returned from those interviews, I shut myself up in my room and vowed eternal anger against those persons who had turned me down, I thought that it was very, very unjust. In the end I presented my exhibition in the Lirolay gallery, which was a gallery where a lot of Argentinean artists had shown, from Seguí to Macció. I felt that I wanted to show, I don’t know why.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** Does your father have anything to do with art?

**Guillermo Kuitca:** My father is an accountant, but as a young man he had painted. Maybe he had
been a socialist realist, a Communist who painted murals, who knows? I think that he had done it with a certain passion and dedication. There was no painter in my family. My father had given up painting when he was eighteen or twenty; by the time I was born fifteen years later there were no traces left, but perhaps it lingered on in some part of him. In fact, he was the first one to buy me oils, an easel, and canvas to paint.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *He gave you a lot of support.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Yes, he supported me. So did my mother. She didn’t have any artistic inclination either, she is a medical psychoanalyst. There were reproductions at home, a portrait of Dora Maar by Picasso, a Braque, a Matisse, maybe a Chagall. Classic images for the Buenos Aires bourgeoisie, the professional middle class. They were the children of immigrants, but they were able to study. I was born into a middle class home with professional parents who were making economic progress, which was possible in Argentina in the 1960s.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *What was the public reaction to the exhibition?*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Very strange. I quarrelled with everybody because it was very difficult for anyone to relate to my work without my age intervening. It was terrible for me that they could only see the work in relation to my age. I found myself fervently wanting not to be young; when I think about it today I say: what a stupid thing to do, but anyway. The reaction was still favourable, all you heard was that the works were mature for my age. I had painted a series of works that I liked a lot, and even if I see them today I think that they had a pretty lively expressionist intensity. For the exhibition I did a series of slightly more delicate works in pastel, those soft ones, which you work with your finger, with slightly deformed images, half Bacon-like, I was under the influence of Bacon at the time -- I did distorted faces and displaced mouths. They weren’t bad, but they weren’t very good either. I even sold a few of them to people who knew my family. What was important is that on the day after the inauguration I got down to painting to show the others that the exhibition wasn’t going to be the end of me. Deep down I was afraid that what they were saying was right. I suppose I was excited, terrified. That was in 1974, and the next show was in 1978; I didn’t continue to exhibit regularly in between. Afterwards, I don’t know, I continued my training as an artist. In 1978 I drew more than I painted, working almost always on paper. I did drawings in pencil in black-and-white, the images of that period were already beginning to have a very literary reliance on themes related to repression or torture. They were a bit literal, a bit artificial, although I did them with great conviction. I was an adolescent and was probably doing what I had to do, but at
some point I felt that the work was rather superficial. Afterwards I developed it in large-scale paintings, a sort of epic painting in which you could see tortured bodies, crucifixes, numbers like the ‘disappeared’, banners. Today I view that work with a lot of skepticism and distance. I think it is the work of a seventeen-year-old who hadn’t yet found his direction.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** It means that the military dictatorship affected you.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** My family was not directly affected by the dictatorship. Of course, my parents must have known the risks that many professionals ran, for example psychoanalysts -- many of my mother’s colleagues had gone to live in Spain, Mexico or Venezuela. However, among my best friends were the daughters of the architect Horacio Baliero, who taught many Argentinean architects. I spent almost every afternoon at their place, and through that family and friends of my friends I got to know about the pressure of the dictatorship. Let’s say that a very large part of the population of Argentina was able to live during those years without knowing what was going on. There was everyday life, and a great deal of ignorance about the facts. I think that fortunately I didn’t fall into that ignorance and, thanks to the Baliero family and my friends, was able to know what was going on, to know specific cases and to feel a lot of fear, a lot of anxiety and above all a strong urge to protest, even though I didn’t feel personally threatened. I was very young for that. Although many, many young people did ‘disappear’, the generation that was kidnapped, tortured and caused to ‘disappear’ was the generation slightly older than mine. So I had a somewhat curious relationship, it was like playing in a minefield. On the one hand we lived a very ordinary life, and on the other we knew what was going on.

I went to the movies a lot. The discovery of the cinema was fundamental at that time, in a single week you could go and see Godard, Polanski, Fellini, whatever, as if it were all the same thing -- almost one and the same film. I remember when we went to see “La dolce vita,” which was obviously a long time after “La dolce vita” had been made. We saw it in 1978 and for us it was as though that was ‘the’ moment of “La dolce vita.” It was interesting how film entered our lives. Literature too, of course. It was a moment in which the world of art and culture entered my life in a block, all together. Those years of my training coincided with the worst years of the military process. The years in which I consumed more culture, more literature, more film, of course there were plenty of banned films and books, but we still carried on listening to contemporary music, reading surrealist literature, everything that came into our hands. It was an amazing mix: everything happened in a very short space, with material that reached us in a very anarchic way. So to come back to your question, yes, my works were influenced by what I thought and knew, and at the same time I realised that my works were purely superficial. In other words, I didn’t feel any
identification with what I was doing -- deep down I was a very skeptical person. I painted out of inertia, because I kept on painting and painting, but I realised that art was somewhere else, that I could not connect with what I was painting. It was in 1980 when I had that very intense encounter which has received so much comment: when I saw the theatre of Pina Bausch in Buenos Aires, which left a strong impression on me, one which seemed to me to be full of violence and of enormous truth. I felt that dance was the worst of all the arts because it was like doing things in the opposite way to how they ought to be done. As if it were an art based exclusively on metaphor instead of on reality. At that moment, there was something Pina Bausch said that struck me a lot – she had said that in dance walking was enough. That was a kind of minimalist thinking that I understood profoundly. Sometimes walking is enough. To see that on stage, with the characters just walking, not jumping or doing dance steps, made me ask myself: How can I make my work from that point of view?

It wasn’t so much the thematic question of whether there were swans or not, but of how to reduce things to their essence. And I realised that I had never done that in my painting. I had spent all my time making jumps. And even though I painted the ‘disappeared,’ it was as if I’d painted swans. It was 1980, I was nineteen, and at that moment I said to myself: I have to abandon painting, reality is in theatre. My world is in theatre. At some moment I really believed that I was going to abandon painting. Around that time I changed studios and did almost nothing for a year -- I was completely blocked. I’d started studying French because I wanted to go to France, I wanted to see if I could get a grant, and at the same time I was tired of hearing that artists always go to live abroad. Deep down I wanted to continue living in Argentina.

I said goodbye to it all, as if I’d never done anything. In 1981 I started from a very basic connection and a lot of introspection to see how I could reconnect with painting. It was a pretty painful moment. I remember that it was a year filled with frustration, in which I couldn’t paint anything at all. Of course, at that time I already knew a bit more about contemporary art and had recently come to realise that painting had been in crisis long before the moment when I had started to paint, but obviously when you’re a child the relationship with the world of art is very remote, the relation between childhood and avant-garde is very improbable. Then I discovered conceptual art, which basically was what hit me with the most force and interested me most. Although there were very few exhibitions in Argentina of contemporary art, there were some interesting artists who were showing their work. Victor Grippo was one of them, for example. There was a gallery called Artemúltiple which showed a much more dynamic art, not simply paintings hanging on the wall. When I went back to working with this in my head, I decided not to allow anything into my studio that was not already there. For example, I didn’t go out to buy brushes, or canvases, or paints, nothing, nothing. I wanted to work like someone who is locked up in his home, a self-imposed
confinement, and who says to himself: OK, make do with what there is. What I did have were some dry remnants of tins of tempera, which I tried to dilute with a little water, brushes which were very hard, very dry, and some pieces of wood, some pieces of patio doors, and some rectangular panels of a Bordeaux colour, that was the background colour of some of the paintings. Those were my materials. The other change of attitude was that I didn’t move much either. I don’t know whether I was going through a depression or whether I wanted to place myself in such a reduced position that I thought that I didn’t even want to move. I thought, then, here is where the artist was, and let’s suppose that here is where the canvas was. But my arm wasn’t long enough to reach it. In other words, I was going to limit myself to using not just what was in my studio, but what was by my side, close to me. And in these conditions, starting from here I began to paint what later became the series “Nadie olvida nada” (1.1-1.2) the first little bed, which has a very basic line, was the result of that. If you look at the line with which those women are painted from the rear, it’s done with a very dry paint, with what was left at the bottom of the tin and on the background of the wood, it’s no more than that. Many years later, Fabián Lebenglik, who wrote about that series, had an interpretation that I liked a lot: I had kept the brush still, and what had moved was the painting. That was more or less the birth of what I see as my work. Of course, many years passed. I’m talking about 1982. When I think about my work, about how it was being put together, taken apart, developing, articulating, disarticulating, opening itself, it seems to me that the beginning is there, that moment in that studio.

Hans-Michael Herzog: All of your work contains this idea of the representation of the map, of mapping, the world, the home, as well the bed as home, very many things related to that, which is for me one of the leitmotifs of your work. What is the central idea behind the map?

Guillermo Kuitca: The map is one of the most fascinating forms of spatial representation. Perhaps I should briefly explain how the maps made their appearance in my work. When I painted those figures that were very small, at the time I realised that they were always in a very large setting. I started to become interested in the relation of scale between things. I think that once I’d recognised that interest, the next step was to represent space through architecture. So I started working with the plan of an apartment. And that plan was also connected with scale, because it stood in relation to the city. It was an apartment inside a building inside a city. Afterwards, the city appeared in the context of a larger map. I think that my work with space was to indicate a point or simply to bring about an interaction between something very small and something very large. Perhaps a map is, among many other things, the location of a minute element within a larger context, at some point, that small figure between gigantic walls had something to do with the map. But I also saw the map
as the opposite to a navigational instrument. For me the map was the instrument for getting lost, not for finding myself. The map interested me not to identify, to know where you are, but on the contrary: to know where you are not. I have the impression that all the maps I painted contain some element of this.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *They are for you to know that you never know where you are.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Yes, something like that. When I made the first maps after a little while I started to paint them on mattresses (1.4, 1.10). I did that spontaneously, but afterwards it took on a lot of meaning, because for me the bed was a plane surface, it was a space of occupation. The bed, that rectangle, was the world I lived in. We humans live in a bed, it’s our first geographic space, the most proximate, the most private -- it may be a single or a double bed, but in some way it’s our earth. To take that physical space to the other extreme, to the map, which is external space, obviously, but which is also socio-political space, the space of the others, not of one, nor of one as one more, was to unite two extremes. There was an abyss between the bed as territory and the map as territory. The idea of juxtaposing them was like placing the same object in two totally extreme situations. I liked the way that my work had been able to arrive at an image that was in some way already given, and what I did was to unveil it. The mattress and the map were connected at some point, by means of a spatial connection that passed through cities, houses, bedrooms and furniture. For me, painting a map on a mattress was like…

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *...taking the world to your bed.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Or the opposite. But the bed as territory, as physical space that you occupy, as plane surface in the most material sense of the term. That’s why I always tried to strip the bed of every psychological connotation of death, sex, dream, desire, birth, sleep. It’s certain that sometimes that bed did appear charged with all that, but for me the bed was that physical space that was material in some way, as if it were a plot of territory. At first I started making mattresses on the wall. Soon afterwards I had the idea of moving that work to a horizontal scale, but it wasn’t because I wanted to make an installation or leave painting, I couldn’t care less about that. I always battled with painting, as all painters do, but I like to think that the battles with painting take place inside the painting, not outside it. For me the installation of the mattresses is very pictorial and is simply horizontal. There was no intention of making ‘an installation’.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *I think that almost everyone thought that it was above all an installation.*
Guillermo Kuitca: For me it’s totally interconnected with my painting. It’s not paintings on the one hand, and this work on the other. The maps were like a matrix, almost like an element that gave me a large measure of agility and dynamism for the rest of the themes I was working on.

Hans-Michael Herzog: *Where did the idea for “Afghanistan” (1.4) come from?*

Guillermo Kuitca: “Afghanistan” is a work from 1990, and perhaps it’s worth asking: Why did I choose the places I chose? When I painted “Afghanistan,” Afghanistan was not perceived as it is today, as a place of conflict where world politics are played out. At the time I painted it, it was for me a kind of Orientalism, but in reverse. I started painting maps of Europe. I like to play with the idea that my Orientalism was, in fact, Europe. A kind of Occidentalism. I saw Europe as the other, not as a part of me. I think that my work has always been misinterpreted in that sense. I painted many maps of Europe at one time, afterwards I did maps of other places such as China or Africa, but the first approach to the maps was with Europe (1.5-1.6, 1.8). I think that people sometimes forget that I’m a Latin American artist, I’m a man who has always lived in Argentina, Europe is not my territory. For me Europe is the other side, I see it from here, not from there. In other words, my maps of Germany were not painted in Belgium or in Germany, but in Argentina. My family came from Russia, the upbringing and everything, but I’m not a European artist. It’s not that I want to remind people of this when they are looking at my work, but I do think it’s important to say that when I was making those maps of Europe, it was like making maps of Afghanistan. So for me Afghanistan, China and Europe are a block which is out there. That’s what interests me. If you look at it from a Eurocentric point of view, Europe is one thing and Afghanistan is another, but it’s not like that for me. I almost never painted maps of Argentina.

When I was looking for a way to make a map which would be just a map, I looked for places without any visual representation. For me, the names in “Afghanistan” are just names, pure topography, pure geography.

Hans-Michael Herzog: *Just a mental projection.*

Guillermo Kuitca: But without an image. Here this route, this road, this name, this city, this distance, are like pure territory. “Das Lied von der Erde” (1.10) with an arbitrary fragment of China. I haven’t the slightest idea of what it is, just names. For me this is perhaps the most extreme case.
**Hans-Michael Herzog:** Like a poetry of the imagination.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** But without elevating it to a scale where that imagination functions, because how can you use your imagination on that?

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** I can. I place myself at a point on the map and, OK, it will never be real, but I place myself there and I play with that, with this idea of being there, of what it will be like, of what will be there.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** But it seems to me to be a non-tourist journey, personally I never imagined that there would be much movement in my works, I have difficulty imagining movement, but that’s a personal matter. For others, it may imply a journey. For me, however, it’s a more static image. I think that there is some movement there somewhere, but I don’t know exactly where. That’s why the relationship with these places had to give me the opportunity of representing a map without that map being the narrative of a place. Generally the places I used were not very familiar, places in which I hadn’t been, for which I had very few references of any kind. They were places where the map could be allowed to do its work in its maximum quality as a map. In other words, they would not be substitutes for something else, the map would be that walking about which Pina Bausch spoke. I thought that the name of the city was enough.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** This intrigues me a lot because I did a lot of mental travelling as an adolescent, looking at maps. But still without wanting to imagine exactly what the situation would be like there. Thinking about spaces, about distances, landscapes and so on.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Perhaps those places are pretty much like dreaming or like a way of thinking that leaps from one thing to another without continuity.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** They lend themselves for that. If you read a name in Chinese, or Afghan, it is strange, different, and automatically you start to imagine something, if not to dream it.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** I think that there is a power in the name. I often think that what was most important to me was the sound, that the quality that I sought in the map was not only visual, but also sonorous. For example, the last maps I did at that time were maps where the names of the cities are written in enormous letters. They were almost like concrete poems. And I think that was what I was looking for. As if I had been looking for a sound and not an image. Perhaps that’s what
Hans-Michael Herzog: How did this approach to the performing arts, and especially to music, function? Because it’s very important in all your work.

Guillermo Kuitca: I’m someone who listens to a lot of music, even though no more closely than anyone who is interested a little in music. I used to really like using the titles of musical compositions for my work, such as when I did a series of paintings in 1986 that I called “Siete últimas canciones” (1.11-1.12) a play on the “Four last songs” by Strauss. I would like my works to function like songs, which have an almost perfect structure. I always wanted my paintings to have the space that a song occupies. You don’t know much about a song. It’s a brief temporal structure, normally people don’t have a perfect knowledge of the history of songs. Sometimes they don’t even understand the language that they are sung in. You take a word, another, and for some reason you think that that experience is complete. There is the voice. I have always wanted to paint thinking that my painting was my voice. I suppose it’s a concept that many of us painters can have, I don’t mean to say that, metaphorically speaking, I sing when I paint, I wouldn’t say that, but the idea of the voice seems to me to be related to the work of painting.

Later, in parallel, opera houses started to appear as architectural space. My work rested on two important blocks — the world of cartography and the world of architecture — and over the years theatre came to assume the same supporting role (1.15-1.16). So the map appeared as a kind of place, the theatre appeared as a different category of place. Somehow the world of theatre appeared not so much as the place of drama, the place of tragedy, comedy or scenography, but as a total space. The baroque idea of life as theatre is evident in my work. Where theatre reaches its extreme place is in the works connected with opera.

Hans-Michael Herzog: Extremely artificial, as artificial as it gets.

Guillermo Kuitca: Yes, nothing is more artificial than an opera. The theatre plans I painted were based not on prose theatre but on music. I think that the interaction between music and theatre appears all the time. It always seemed important to me that my work should be plagued, contaminated or visited by non-pictorial agents. At some point music started to help me to move my work, to move within my work. I need movement, as you will realise. I need to be involved in a variety of things at the same time. I have the impression that the map, music and the theatre were all instruments in the same way. For example, when we talk about the map of China, “Das Lied von der Erde,” the title is taken from the work by Mahler. Now, that work by Mahler is in turn
based on Chinese poems.
I have never done graphic design, but I have always been very fascinated by the covers of books and records (1.17, 1.19). “Má Vlast” (1.18) shows this idea transposed to a different scale, taking a musical work and using the traditional yellow label of Deutsche Grammophon, which is well-known in the world of so-called academic music. At that time, in 1999, I was as always very much at odds with Argentina, with my fatherland. As you see here, ‘my fatherland’ appears in many languages but not in my own, it doesn’t say ‘my fatherland’ in Spanish. What I wanted to do, whether you can see it or not, was to take the label almost as it appears on a Deutsche Grammophon record, with the difference of including all the information except the name of the composer. So the name of the composer of “Má Vlast,” the Czech Bedrich Smetana, does not appear here. At that moment I wanted to say something about my country, and it seemed that my country was this, a country without a composer, that nobody had written, or if somebody had composed it, he had escaped, that did not have a specific language but many foreign languages…


Guillermo Kuitca: Or a very strong identity without a composer. The identity is there, what is lacking is the father of that identity. There’s something else special about this work too: the surface has a very dense oil and is painted in a colour and a way that resemble vinyl. As if it were the surface of the recorded music. Although at that time, of course, music was not recorded analogically but digitally, I still wanted the surface of the painting to be like an enormous vinyl. And you can see that, you can see the groove.

Hans-Michael Herzog: It’s very physical.

Guillermo Kuitca: You can almost see it as the groove of the music. I wanted to play with an image that would simultaneously represent a digital and an analog world, because at that time recorded music had been broken down into digits. The other features that appear in this painting seem very theatrical, like abysses or doors opening onto a void, you don’t know what’s on the other side.

Hans-Michael Herzog: Which is another very important motif in all your work.

Guillermo Kuitca: Yes, the theatre in the middle appears as if it were a box of crystal and in the upper part reproduces the trompe-l’oeil which can be seen in the entrance of the stage of the Teatro
Colón in Buenos Aires, it’s copied from that, it’s a very personal way of saying ‘my country’. Not because my country is the Teatro Colón, but as the only reference to something recognisable.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *Something of yours.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Something of mine. Well, mine or not, because the Teatro Colón isn’t mine. I saw those voids as places to throw oneself into. I don’t know what’s on the other side. When I think about those transmission belts that I painted (1.21, 1.44), I haven’t the faintest idea of what there might be on the other side of the openings. I think of it as an abyss. Those spaces in “Má Vlast” are abysses.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *Like dark voids, black holes.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Yes. I’m interested in the theatre because it enables me to think of the world as an absolutely functional space. The idea of thinking of a universe full of black holes as a stage set or as a bed. Putting a universe in a bed is like putting a universe in a stage set. I like the possibility that the stage can make possible the idea of something beyond, when in reality there is nothing more than… I don’t know, just a stage, nothing more.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *Yes, it’s a something beyond. For me it has a lot to do with the notion of desire.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Yes, I think it’s connected with desire because you are not just a spectator. What is going on there involves us in some way or other. It gives me the impression that stages produce that paradox which is the representation of something that you are not experiencing, so the desire for…

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *Like a platform for the production of possible desires.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** As the space of possibility.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *I’d like you to talk about “Kindertotenlieder,” (1.23) which is a very special painting.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** After working a lot with the routes, at some point I felt that the map was a
structure that was constricting me, so I wanted to get away from the idea of the road, and paintings emerged in which I traced lines but which no longer maintained the structure of the route. But although the structure could be spontaneous, the image was tense. In parallel, I had worked on a series of plans of apartments and of cities where the limits of the plan and of the city were painted with thorns; for me it was more of a playing with the idea of Christianity rather than with that of the concentration camp, which seems to be a very common interpretation and one that is foreign to me, not mine. I was interested in the play between the religious painting and the crown of thorns as a mental space. I’m not much interested in religion, but there is a certain religious iconography that seems important to me and the thorns seemed to be the maximal point, the peak towards which all religious iconography is aimed. I liked the idea of playing with a kind of religious chaos. As if religion were to be seen as the greatest state of confusion of the human race. For me the crowns of thorns are like a line internal to thought, like a mental structure. At the end of the 1980s the plans of apartments appeared represented with thorns (1.25) and later in the cities. Then I did these paintings which I called “Corona de espinas.” (1.22, 1.24) They are very large works, in which the crown of thorns is visible but as if driven mad. In one case, for example, I used the figure of a roller coaster. The last work in the series was “Kindertotenlieder,” the title of a work by Mahler. I took a drawing that I had done when I was two years old, which my mother had kept somewhere in the house, and that drawing was the matrix of the painting. It’s the scribbling of a child. I rescued that drawing and used it to make the crown of thorns. I think that the dead child to which the title refers is me. Basically, what interested me was the structure as if it were a state of confusion, of madness, although there can be clarity in a child, the adult sees it as something incomprehensible. The hermetics of this structure is that it sets out from a child’s drawing.

Around that time I worked on “Circulación de la sangre.” (1.26) There too, the veins and arteries go their own way without following the logic of the nervous system, like a reaction of the blood which is uncontrolled.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** You know that there are almost no painters in the Daros-Latinamerica Collection. Just you, Antonio Díaz and one or two more. Apart from all the content that you have in your work, your paintings seem to be good paintings to me. But what does a good painter mean to you? When is a painting good in your eyes? What are your criteria?

**Guillermo Kuitca:** I suppose that it’s a perception that operates in parallel times. If I am to find a painting good, it has to be something that is tied to time and at the same time to be completely outside time, as if it had an internal relation riddled with contradiction. I believe that there are some touches of an artist or a painter that are very important, even if we don’t know what that touch is.
It’s the same as what I was saying about the voice. It’s probably easier to recognise it in the voice because we think that that touch, that texture that the voice has, is in some artists and not in others. I don’t know whether I can recognise a good painting or not, I suppose I can, because I’m very accustomed to paintings, but what I want to say is that I don’t know if I can recognise it in me. I think I’m a pretty complex painter and I don’t want my work to be seen only by my hand. I often do things that are very much the opposite of my own capabilities. I know that some people complain that my touch should be more visible in my work.

**Hans-Michael Herzog: Style.**

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Of course I try to take that on. Painting is a battlefield. It’s true that you don’t see many painters and sometimes think that painting is removed from our time, but to me it seems that the degree of commitment of the gaze in a painting is so enormous, so demanding, so important that it gives me the impression that painting is the best kept secret. There is nothing more contemporary than painting. A painting as a battlefield about what is, what is not, what ought to be, what I like, what I hate, what I love. I’m not talking necessarily about the theme of the work, I’m talking about its materiality. The mental play that produces a painting is so amazingly dynamic that I think that a good painting is that space which opens the door for that play to take place. If I were exclusively a painter who knows how to do some things, and shows that, I would be closing off that space, I would be limiting it to a place into which I don’t want to fall. I don’t have any conflict with being a painter. I have a lot of conflicts with my work, with art, like any other contemporary artist, but at no moment do I think that painting is in a situation in which it cannot take account of the aesthetic epoch. I realise when I paint that for me painting is the way of entering the world, not of leaving it. It’s an entrance vehicle, not an exit. That’s why it’s difficult for me to believe that painting can sometimes remain out of the contemporary aesthetic debate. When I started this pictorial project, it was an absolute crisis for me, I had the idea that nothing was going to be possible in painting and that everything was going to be possible on the stage. All my life I’ve tried to demonstrate the contrary. Sometimes I say to myself: My God, everything is possible in a pictorial space! In painting I think that there is a very private nucleus and that I think that is what opens that privacy to the spectator. I recognise a good painting when I recognise that privacy. What I mean to say is, there’s a world that is established between the painting and me. Photography, some installations open shared worlds. A good painting is that which opens up a link in which there is nothing else. That is why we are so lacking in confidence, why we are very alone in front of the painting. There is an experience of solitude, no, not solitude, privacy. That is the pictorial measure.
Hans-Michael Herzog: *I do remember well a situation, a few years ago in Berlin, when I was looking at the section of Flemish art from the fourteenth century and somebody was crying from emotion caused by the painting. Because there is this privacy and you clearly see that it belongs to this period, but it is so broad that you find yourself and you don’t know in what. And that’s so beautiful, when that happens, that’s it. It’s impressive.*

Guillermo Kuitca: It’s right what you’re saying, because sometimes we have to protect the pictorial experience so that we can understand that once that happens, that’s it. The pictorial experience is exhausted in that private encounter. This doesn’t mean to say that you or others can’t talk about painting, but it gives me the impression that it will always be a rather peripheral discourse. For me it’s there, in that space of privacy, and that’s what I hope to achieve with the spectator. That a space is opened up, it may be very brief, very small, it may or may not be recognised as such, but that a space of intimacy is opened up. I think it’s most like an amorous experience. Not because you fall in love with the painting, but because it’s almost like an affective space. I think that those are the situations that are given by painting. At the same time I’m interested in painting that can propose a great skepticism. I’m a great fan of Warhol. For me Warhol is a very important figure, although sometimes I don’t even know why. I’m interested in Warhol as a painter who is absolutely remote from these aspects we’ve been discussing. If it weren’t for that other side in which I feel like someone who is split, separated and can be in some other place with a part of his mind, I don’t think I would be able to make the paintings that I make. There’s a part that is pure connection, and another part connected with the most absolute distancing possible. I need that space too. At some point I try to create a space for that in my work. That it is not purely an emanation, a faculty, a skill or a talent, but at the same time pure instrumentation, pure vehicle, pure thing. It’s in that point of intersection that I think it’s possible to paint today. Whether people see that in my paintings or not, that’s something else. I need that road personally. Inside me there’s a person who is so skeptical that I can’t even explain to you how skeptical he is. I want to give it room. Not repress it. There’s a part of the painting that is very important for me: that plane is black, it’s a thing, it has extension, in other words, there’s something that I want to appear in the painting that is absolutely… Once again, walking, that place where there is nothing but a space painted without intention, without technique, without resources, without anything. Those are the two roads that I need in order to be able to do my work.

Hans-Michael Herzog: *We already know that every painter considers himself the best and only painter in this world. But who are or were your favourites?*
Guillermo Kuitca: Warhol’s painting delights me. I think it is a miracle because it comes from a very particular place. Of course in my heart there is always a place for the painting of Bacon. There are some painters who show you roads, but not to go down them, on the contrary. Bacon’s paintings were made at a point in history when Bacon took on everything that was possible to do pictorially, as Matisse had probably done before him. There was a time when I always went to the MoMA to see Matisse’s “The Piano Lesson,” which was my favourite painting. I know every detail of that painting. Every time I see it I try to see if everything is still the same. Obviously I’ve seen a lot of paintings, the great painters still move me a lot. After some experiences, like having seen a big retrospective of Mondrian, I realised that you go through that experience and afterwards the eye can’t go back to constructing itself in the same way. That, too, is to have gone through a pictorial experience, but from the other side. I’m not very original in naming probably the greatest artists of the century. I don’t much enjoy the painting of the Abstract Expressionists. I don’t have much of an eye for more heroic pictorial experiences like those of Richter or Kiefer, for example. It gives me the impression that I need more privacy with the work. Probably, the big pictorial projects of the main contemporary artists leave me a bit cold because they don’t give me that privacy.

Hans-Michael Herzog: No soul.

Guillermo Kuitca: Maybe, although the idea of a work being completely lacking in soul is very attractive. I think that once the privacy with the work is lost, the pictorial experience is lost, and then I’m left out. For some miraculous reason, Warhol’s is a gigantic project, but at the same time it continues to have privacy, though I don’t know where.

Hans-Michael Herzog: I see what you mean. The others are just virtuosi.

Guillermo Kuitca: Richter’s pictorial project doesn’t separate painting from the other things. I think that his work could have happened in other contexts, it could have been film, and at the same time there’s too much defence of painting in Richter, almost a constant homage to painting. I’m not interested in tradition but in what is specific. I don’t want to paint to keep up a tradition, it’s all the same to me. I’m not interested in defending painting.

Hans-Michael Herzog: What is your notion of beauty? When is a thing beautiful in terms of painting and not only in those terms?

Guillermo Kuitca: It gives me the impression that beauty and privacy are connected with one
another. It’s very difficult for beauty to be something public. My notion of beauty, probably like that of any other artist or anyone else who lives in an aesthetic world, is connected with what I find beautiful, so I have the impression that beauty is privacy. I don’t have any other idea at the moment.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** Is beauty important to you, is it something to which you aspire, or is it none of your concern?

**Guillermo Kuitca:** No, it’s none of my concern. I think it happens. That’s what I believe, that it simply happens. I feel awkward when confronted with the search for beauty, not only mine, but also that of the rest.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** I think, at any rate, that knowing produces beauty too. If you come across someone who seems ugly to you at first, and later, when you get to know him, he becomes filled with beauty.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** It’s like that movement, but in the opposite direction. What you’re saying helps me to think this: as an artist I probably don’t search for beauty, let’s put it like that, even though it may sound a bit abstract, but I don’t go out looking for it. However, if what I have done creates the situation in which the spectator has to look for or find beauty in what I have done, that is something else, but I can’t go along that road for it. When you talk about the meeting with that person, it’s a road that only you can take, it’s only you who has to see the growing beauty each time. I have the impression that in any case beauty is in the eye of the beholder. In other words, it’s very difficult for the process towards the beautiful to be given by the work. Generally speaking, I think that if the work is constructed in an exaggerated way to lead in that direction, the most likely is that the spectator will be led in the opposite direction. I don’t mean this as a defence of ugliness, but I don’t think there’s a contradiction between the one and the other.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** I’m thinking about your paintings. This green and red map, called “Everything” (1.28) striking in its use of colour is very beautiful. I could live forever with that painting.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** So could I.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** But take “Global Order” (1.29): this map of the world has a completely
different beauty. It speaks of life, of wounds, of so many things at the same time, with an enormous subtlety, it has a completely different concept of beauty.

Guillermo Kuitca: Completely. As an artist, I haven’t fixed beauty as the object towards which my work should aim. It’s a kind of energy. From a certain moment, the paintings begin to have a life of their own. A work like “Everything” has a kind of visual vibration that is very attractive, while a work like “Global Order” starts out from a completely different point. But at no moment were the works constructed with that in mind. What I mean to say is that it’s with difficulty that I have turned my attention in that direction. Of course, upon seeing them I recognise that difference.

Hans-Michael Herzog: Does it sometimes happen that you finish a work and consider it as very striking, very yours, perfect in the sense of finished, and you are content? Doesn’t the next pictorial project frighten you? How does that function?

Guillermo Kuitca: I work more or less on three or four projects at the same time. When I finish a work, of course I feel relief and a general eagerness to start something new. I don’t really know why – perhaps to show myself that I’m not afraid when, in fact, I am. It’s a sort of contra phobia. That classic moment of terror in front of the canvas doesn’t happen in my case at the start, but in the course of painting. I always have the idea that my work does not start out from the blank canvas, but goes towards the blank canvas. What I would like to do is to reach that abyss in which the canvas becomes blank, and I would be delighted if the spectator looking at my canvases should share in that experience of when an artist is facing a blank canvas, when everything still has to be done. In fact, I’m not afraid of starting another series, for better or for worse, I don’t care, I’m so accustomed to working, to painting, it’s become like breathing. Obviously I think a lot, all the time I’m struggling with myself over what I do, and I’m used to this, as I told you, to the painting as a battlefield, which is an everyday reality for me. The state of fear, of excitement, of enthusiasm, of disenchantment, of embarrassment, is all the time, it goes on all the time. It’s not that one state comes, settles in, and then the other one comes along. That’s why a successful work is at the same time a frustration, a secret pride, a secret embarrassment, all together. What I do recognise is that I’m not frightened by the blank canvas; on the contrary, it excites me.

Hans-Michael Herzog: Your work runs in loops. “Untitled” is from 1994 (1.12), and yet it looks like a work from the Eighties (1.14).

Guillermo Kuitca: It’s a fundamental work for me because when I made it it enabled me to join
and widen the idea of the loop. And in a painting like *L'Encyclopédie* (1.35), for example, there's another idea that circulates a lot in my work, which is the work as part of a cycle (1.32-1.34). In this one, I worked on the disposition of a marble floor which is recorded in *L'Encyclopedie* of Diderot, I wanted to soften a rigid surface like marble and turn something so calm into something that was moving slowly. What I like about this work is that it seems to be happening in front of you. It's like a slow motion action painting. It gives me the impression that these grand project of civilisation, like *L'Encyclopédie*, the idea of bringing everything together, arranging and organising it all, are projects which have so little to do with painting, which is unable to organise anything, that I became interested in bringing them into association with one another. I like to relate my work to cycles like "L'Encyclopédie" because I'm interested in the major contradiction between a medium like painting, which is so specific and so partial, and the abyss of an enormous collection of things. Many of my works are about that, like *The Tablada Suite.* (1.36-1.37)

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *But generally in your work, today, construction appears hand in hand with deconstruction, with destruction* (1.39).

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Yes, all the time, but I don’t want to think of my work in terms of whether it is constructing, deconstructing or dismantling itself. For example, in a work like *Acoustic Mass I,* (1.40) it might seem that the theatre is broken, but in some way the painting of this work is based on the construction of its parts, so in reality, what I did was a construction. Sometimes it appears in a more specific and anecdotal sense, as in *Curriculum,* (3.2) which is, indeed, like having planted a bomb and blown up my history into a thousand fragments. I am interested in that axis that ran through my work in those works that look "towards" what seems to be a stage (1.11) and those which look "from" a stage (1.43). If you place the viewpoint here, this is the viewpoint from the stage, not towards it. That play of 180 degrees was a king of loop for me. A loop that is in theatre. I see these works as the representation of stage fright.

I painted *"Untitled (Unclaimed Luggage)"* (1.45) after a series called *"Nocturnes,"* (1.46-1.47) in which I didn't work with space, but with the objects that fill space, such as office desks, church altars and confessionals, physical exercise machines, sausage-making machines, roulette and poker tables. I proceed from banal to even more banal functions. In the middle of all that the luggage belt appeared. And at that moment I thought that object had the potential to be something more. I really liked the idea of thinking about luggage that doesn't belong to anybody, which keeps going round and round without anyone reclaiming it. And it led me to another circular movement which is not only the theme of the belt, but the pictorial treatment. From a realistic to a graphic representation. And that is like another loop. It's a coming and going too, not the suitcase that comes and goes, but
the painting itself that moves between a graphic and architectural representation and a different, pictorial and realistic representation.

The important difference between “Untitled (Unclaimed Luggage)” and a work like “Terminal” (1.44) or “Trauerspie” (1.21) is that the luggage is never represented in the latter. That would have turned the work into something very anecdotal. The luggage is represented in “Untitled (Unclaimed Luggage),” on the other hand, as a simple rectangle, because it seemed to me that the graphic representation was a better fit for the image of what keeps going round and round. I think that what you call the loop recurs in many situations.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** And often with a good deal of irony, as in the case of the confessionals.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** Ah, of course. I worked on the confessional with several variations. The traditional Catholic confessional, with a kneeling figure on one side and a seated figure on the other (1.48). One variation was to rotate the seated figure towards the kneeling one, then it looks like a meeting between two guys, like in a sex booth (1.49). And in another version, which I called “Confesión equivocada,” I had the confessional and a kneeling figure, but with a Jewish kipa and tefillin, as if he had gone to confess in the wrong place.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** Two more questions. One: What is the function of your drawings in your work?

**Guillermo Kuitca:** There is something important about the drawings, and that is I don’t work with sketches. My entire production of drawings, probably ninety per cent, are all drawings done after the paintings, a posteriori. It is very important for me that the drawing should originate after the painting and not vice versa. It’s something I can’t avoid, it’s not that I planned it like that, but that’s how it happens. On the other hand, it’s a way of making sure that the drawing is not converted into something instrumental for the painting. When I do a painting I don’t want to know everything about it, I don’t want to have everything pre-arranged in a drawing. Sometimes I think that my paintings are the road to the drawings. That my drawings are the end and the paintings the means. Once again, a loop. Nowadays I’m used to it being like that, so it’s very natural for me to do a painting and later for those images to be transferred to paper or to the computer to be elaborated digitally. For example, some of the drawings were first done on the computer and later manipulated or altered after they had been printed.

When I brought together the 81 drawings of this collection of drawings from 1981 to 1996 that we are going to exhibit (2.1-2.82), I realised that, for the large quantity of paintings that I have done
throughout my life, the quantity of drawings was very small, as if I had protected the drawings from falling into that very erratic place into which drawings sometimes fall. Obviously, for me the drawing is a place of great pleasure, but it is also a specific space, above all those in this series. Nowadays, yes, I do make far more drawings, and once a painting appears, it opens the way for me to make many drawings, many works on paper (3.1-3.11).

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** My final question is: When did you set up this workshop for artists here in Buenos Aires? I think it is a tremendously important and good initiative. Tell me about the reasons for it.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** It was in 1991, fifteen years ago. I love dialogue with other artists. I like it, exactly why I don’t know. But it’s not that simple. At that time I had separated myself a lot from Argentina and was living in a paradox. I spent all my time in Buenos Aires, but I never exhibited in Buenos Aires. I had an incredible divorce in my head and my life, making all my work in Argentina but never showing here. In general I don’t think that I make my work for any particular place. In fact, it never matters to me, but the situation I was living through in Buenos Aires was becoming rather absurd. And I realised that I was living in a sort of limbo because I had lost a lot of contact with the local artistic community. So driven by my own need, I realized the way to start to have contact with other artists was to create this programme, which was actually no more than a space for discussion of art. There weren’t many of them at the time. Now, luckily, there are lots of spaces for discussion of art. I like it when an artist meets other, younger artists, not necessarily students, but artists who have already finished their training, but are doing their work and in some way need…

**Hans-Michael Herzog:**…a platform, a space.

**Guillermo Kuitca:** A space, yes, I never conceived it as a platform. I know that this programme helped many artists, but the first necessity came from me. I seriously needed to maintain contact with Buenos Aires and to have a land line. On the other hand, I had had a lot of luck in my career, it had gone pretty well, even if I’ve never had the feeling of having been successful. For example, every day when I start work in the morning, I think I’m the worst, the last, those things that you sometimes think when you can feel that it’s worthless. Perhaps this is too personal, it doesn’t matter, but to go back to the theme, I think that, above all in a country like Argentina, if you’ve been pretty fortunate and achieved recognition, if you don’t share your experience with others, you’re a bit unreasonable. I feel that I am privileged. I’m not a US painter, I’m an Argentinean
painter. By that I mean that I can’t take it for granted that what happened to me can happen to anyone. I was very lucky, I worked a lot, it’s true, but the careers of artists in Latin America are not as predictable as they perhaps are in the United States, where you know that you go from here to here. In Latin America you don’t know where you’re going, where your work will take you.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *In loops again.*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** In loops, it’s part of the loop. If I don’t construct a reality which includes me as a part, I go crazy. I was very lucky to be able to work with very talented artists, who have grown a lot and been successful, a few have been painters, many are photographers, I like to work with photographers, I feel very much at ease with photography. I’m not a good photographer, but I realise that I have a good eye. In fact, this programme gave me contact with the world around me and I think that I have been able to help the others.

**Hans-Michael Herzog:** *If you analyse this process which has been going on for fifteen years, did everything work out as you wanted?*

**Guillermo Kuitca:** There were some things that I tried to keep clear. At first I didn’t know what it was about, but fortunately the response was very good, in that many artists applied for this programme. We receive six hundred applications for twenty to thirty places. My dream was to open this programme first to Mercosur, and afterwards to other countries. I dream of Buenos Aires being able to host artists from elsewhere. I will do it one day. But one of the things I proposed was that the programme should not go beyond my possibilities. I always kept it on a small scale that was easy to move. In other words, the heart of this programme is the relationship between a group of artists and me and between each one of these artists and nothing else. It never grew nor settled in a permanent place. One of the positive things that happened was that it always returned to the original goals. There is no question of promoting artists, I think that the programme fulfilled its objectives in as much as that relationship between artists that I was looking for did happen. Today, it is a successful programme through which a lot of people have passed, and it is still very small. It still has a very simple structure. Perhaps you might ask why keep it on this scale, because in fact every time I have to start, I have to start from zero. But for me it is still a process, a way of being an artist. I’m not someone who can set up an academic structure. One aspect that received some criticism, was that this programme is based to some extent on a personalist structure, in fact it is the relation between many artists and me, but not between various artists who do the same as I do. At some point I had my doubts and thought that, yes, it was certain that we would have to play other
games, but with the years I realised no, it was fine as it was. I had many opportunities to teach, to visit art programmes in universities in many places, and I don’t want my programme to become like the tourism that I sometimes see, when the work of the students is overexposed to thousands and thousands of opinions. I prefer the relationship to be based on confidence. The structure is based, first of all, in establishing a relationship and then talking about art. Or establishing a relationship while you talk about art. But if I visit the studio of a young artist who shows me his work and I have half an hour to say what I think, I shake his hand and go off, that’s tourism. What have we got here? In that sense, this programme grew stronger even in its weakest points. For me, if sometimes the weak point was that it was too much centred on my relationship with other artists, I think that this has also been its strength. Of course, everyone is asked for his opinion and so on, but the programme in itself is no more than a space where artists can do their work, each one making whatever he wants to make, when he pleases, as he pleases, and take part in group meetings twice a week. No more than that. And every time it grows a little, it returns to its original situation. That’s why I never set up an institutional space bigger than the present one. I think it has been fine like this. And I don’t separate it from my work. At one time I had the idea that since I’d been lucky, I should do something for others once a week, and now I do it twice a week. So one day, perhaps, this activity may come to replace my work as a painter completely or not, but for me it’s as important as painting or drawing.

- Hans-Michael Herzog and Guillermo Kuitca