

# The Seven Levels

When a movie begins, a tacit contract is established between the viewer and the film. In the first five minutes, the rules of the reality that will be seen are set up. Viewers are, for the most part, willing to accept anything during those first five minutes.

Mónica Girón desarrolló en varios años de experiencia coOver the course of years of experience as an artist and educator, Mónica Giron developed an esoteric and rational method based on intuitive knowledge. That method provides a more or less objective way to approach a work of art. Learning this method opened up in our young artists' minds a path that, in turn, inspired other methods—fictitious, literary, and real methods—for our work and for readings as artists and as educators. In its transmission, the method shifted; it was transformed with each mind that applied it.

When, in 2012, we began the Artists' Program at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, we had the sense we were playing in the major leagues—and that feeling would only sink in more deeply as the year advanced. It may or may not have been true, but we all thought more or less the same thing: we had been selected and hundreds of other artists had not been selected that year to form part of the elite artists' program because we were better artists than they were. That belief meant that everything we did—each gesture made and word spoken—in the context of the program was essential. We needed to be looked at and chosen anew every day, and the cogency of that choice be confirmed by an action, a word, or recognition from the person at the helm of the program that year: Mónica Giron.

I realized that the transference was powerful. Due to the education-friendship-authority-desire mix in the relationship to a teacher along with the excitement of being in the program and the sense that everything that happened in those cloisters was extremely important—decisive even—not only to our future but also to

the future of art, the group's energy was a time bomb. And the method was a sort of homeopathic cure: we may not have realized it, but it was being released into our collective body to curative ends at regular intervals.

- Hello... hello? Hey... Ok... so ask me questions.
- How does the Mónica Giron method work?
- Well, Mónica's seven-level method is a method that... deconstructs through categories...
- Categories of language?
- Of language and of emotions, but of different orders: the merely physical order, the order of analysis.... Artistic reception according to critical categories and a constructed narrative that combines a number of registers of perception... The person shows their work and doesn't say anything about it. The group that will analyze the work according to the method's chart breaks it down without the artist's knowing what is being written on the chart... This is really boring, right? I don't want to describe it.
- I know how it works. What I want to know is what it does to you!
- Right, I don't want to have to do level one! (Editor's note: The method's level one is an exhaustive description of what one sees: the vast physical complexity of what one has before one's eyes. It is agonizing because it requires the viewer to connect to immediate reality. There is no room for pulling oneself away from the here and now or projecting into the future, which leads to intense anxiety for the first few minutes (it later subsides). The more exhaustive the physical description of the object or event at hand, however, the more fruitful the other levels.) The method actually shows that physical reality as such

- does not exist. To put it in psychoanalytic terms, the method evidences a reality where the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic—the three elements that language binds together while reading the work—are enmeshed.
- That happens in the presence of a work of art. We almost never sit down to describe what we see, all the less so when in the presence of works that are a sort of socially accepted construction of language. Almost any viewer is willing to accept that a painting of a woman is a painting of a woman and not a painting of a certain thickness where a collection of curved lines and orange tones, say, are organized into semicircles. Language, synapses, and representation are part of everyday experience and the need to decode reality. Art is a sort of overstimulated version of that image-representation-interpretation synthesis that we perform in daily life. The problem is that it is taken for granted. A series of things we assume are there aren't there, even though they may appear to be. What the method proposes, strangely, is objective vision. It is a way to understand what is actually seen and to distinguish between what is seen and what is not seen, what we would like to be there but is not actually there.
  - So the method is structured like this: while looking at an artwork, you put words in a chart with seven levels, one after the other: 1- physical, 2- emotional, 3- sentimental, 4- thought structure, 5- conformation of self, 6- soul, and 7- spirit.
  - The chart is filled out in groups of five. The words used must be very precise (the dictionary is consulted frequently).
  - "Thought structure" is how the work thinks, and "conformation of self" is the work's identity. But what is the difference between sentimental and emotional?
  - The emotional is the stuff of your emotions, the first projection of the spirit after the physical. The sentimental is more connected to language, that is, to processed emotions.
  - I see.
  - Why do they say it's an esoteric method?
  - Because it takes place from within.
  - How did the method operate in me, then?
  - That is exactly the question: How did it operate in you?
  - Well, first off, the method is emancipating. Answers appear over the course of the analysis, the time that that takes.
  - That's true. The method is based on time. You can't get to the last level if you haven't done the first.
  - At the same time, though, its effects ensue as you employ the method. In other words, practicing it takes time, a major time investment. It takes conscious and unconscious energy.
  - The method helped me cast off prejudices and enabled me to approach any work of art without previous information. It gave me the questions you have to ask a work to accept it, appealing to a democracy of artistic experience. And in that sense it is really raw, because if a level is not there, the work does not exist as art. The method helps you perceive and understand when the body of an artwork is actually a body. And then, when you sit down to create something after so much analysis with the method, you end up filling in the chart; if you feel that a body of work does not take shape, something is not right. A body is something with autonomy because it is self-sustaining.
  - Something that jarred me a little is that idea of imminence or the self-sustaining "being" of the work. The way she conveyed the method to us ended up baring the work of context, depoliticizing it in a way. For a while, it seemed odd to me that we didn't have to relate the works more closely to the political contexts in which they exist.
  - That's not true.
  - Or is it? Where is context in the method?
  - It's not a level, but it comes with the work! The thing is, our works were out of context! The method puts you in context through the work's own discourse! The physical description is so assertive and precise that if you do it right the reality of the work culminates,
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and all the levels that are jumbled together straighten out as they emerge from the perceptive experience. The thing is, many of the works we were making were out of context.

- But I got the sense that the method didn't appeal to their contexts, didn't look there.
- No, the method is infallible. Well, maybe not. What is infallible about it is that it describes what you see, not what you imagine you see. So if a work doesn't have a context, the method will tell you the context you imagine for it. But for me all works have a context, it just might not be the context you want to see. For me, the soul and the spirit reposition the work in its context.
- Hmm... for me, the soul and spirit are more tied to a poetic positioning of the work.
- No. I'm a dogged atheist and I believe that the soul and the spirit are the essence of something, and the potency of that essence leads you to a question about the work's ethos, which is a political, but unconscious, decision. It is a false transcendence because it asks a question about the essence of the work but it is really a question about its permanence on earth. It positions the work's being in the context that constructs it.
- I know, I know. Dominant tendencies are oppressive; they don't let you position yourself in your own context.
- What did the method change in you?
- I understood something about the gaze that comes from beyond oneself. You think everyone sees what you see, but that's not necessarily the case. I understood that I cannot project what I see on everyone because they don't see it. And I understood something about how oppressive and forced normative artistic discourse is. The method places the work in its own context, as opposed to neo-conceptual postmodernity that tells you can name anything however you like.
- It's reality.
- Right, it is indeed reality. But it is not reality for the whole world! It is important to understand something about otherness, to avoid what is mistakenly called

commonsense, which is in fact an assemblage of dominant discourses. I had a lot of trouble understanding the completely idiotic fact that there are subjectivities others than mine—that even though in art there are interrelated fields of common understanding. Only when I was able to understand that did I understand that if I wanted others to see in my work what I wanted to see, I had to put it there. You have to learn to be seen because there is someone other than you looking.

- Yeah, you have to take a step toward the viewer in some way. - And see how ridiculous artistic thought is. That makes you a little more generous. - That's right. I spent a lot of time making works "for me."
- I'm not sure how much the method has to do with the context that grounds it. In terms of the political in Argentine art in particular, it's so hard to find the right distance—and that frustrates me a lot.
- I get that. You are frustrated because the method democratically takes in things you wish didn't exist.
- Right, the method has room for idiocy, right-wing thought, vacuity, and intelligence... all of it.

We, Liv Schulman and Ivo Aichenbaum, participated in the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella Artists' Program in 2012. We wrote this text together during a train ride from Berlin to Warsaw spent asking ourselves and each other questions about the Mónica Giron method. We recorded the answers, omitted the questions, and transcribed those answers to form the basis for a dialogue in two voices. We currently give art classes in them we establish and create new methods. The Mónica Giron method served as a model for later systems.

Liv Schulman con Ivo Aichenbaum, 2017, tren de Berlín a Varsovia

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