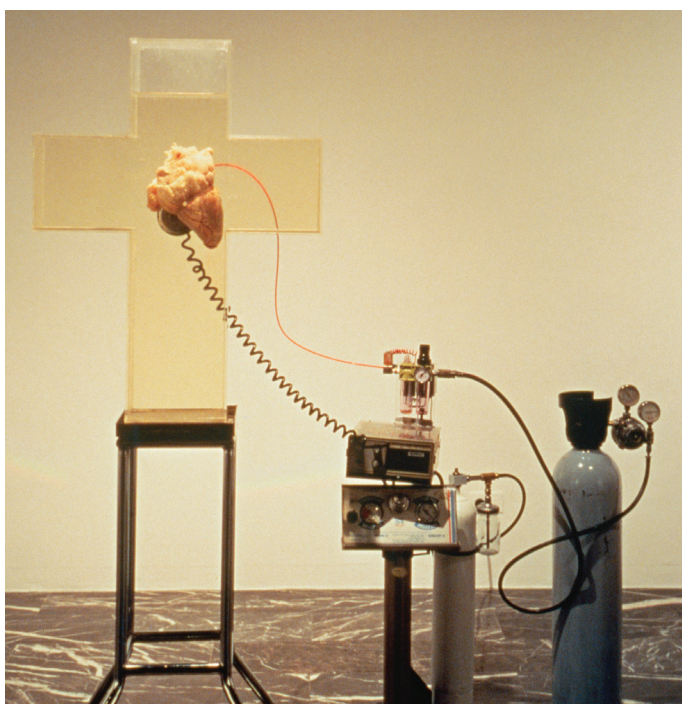


I will fear no evil

José Antonio Hernández-Díez

Exhibition from 18 March to 26 June 2016



Sagrado corazon activo, 1991. Courtesy of the Artist

I WILL FEAR NO EVIL presents works from the beginning of José Antonio Hernández-Díez's career in the late 1980s and early nineties – several of which have not been seen since they were first exhibited – in dialogue with a new project developed especially for the occasion.

Emerging on the international stage when the idea of contemporary art as a global language was being proposed, and the dominance of artists from Europe and the United States was being questioned, the work of Hernández-Díez (b. 1964, Caracas, Venezuela) has consistently rejected a signature style. During this period he participated in a number of landmark exhibitions including *Aperto '93: Emergency/Emergenza* at the 45th Venice Biennale (1993) and *Cocido y crudo* (The Cooked and the Raw) at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (1994). His exhibitions have spanned photography, sculpture, video and drawing; metaphysics together with adolescent humour; high-end production as well as 'poor' and unconventional materials. Furthermore, he has declined a straightforward contextualisation as a Latin-American voice, complicated by the fact that he relocated from Caracas to Barcelona in the late 1990s.

The present exhibition looks back to Hernández-Díez's first experimental works with video alongside early iconic screen- and vitrine-based pieces. Hernández-Díez's production from the late 1980s takes the form of monitor-based video-loop sculptures that evoke the notion of electronic moving pictures as haunted and magical phenomena. Drawing on sources such as literary horror and Romanticism, illusionism and special effects, these brilliantly inventive works imagined video art as a form of electrified Gothic with privileged access beyond the rational world. They foreshadow many of the concerns that were inherited and extended by Hernández-Díez's first sculptural works from the 1990s – the relationship between superstition and orthodoxy, anatomy and technology, sacred symbolism, and the transgressive place held by children and animals in devotional consciousness.

I will fear no evil includes three works presented at the time of his landmark first monographic exhibition *San Guinefort y otras devociones* (Saint Guinefort and other devotions), held at Sala RG, Caracas, in 1991. The exhibition heralded what the artist termed a 'new Christian iconography'. This disquieting and seductive body of work deals with the application of communications and medical technology and its interlacing with systems of paranormal belief, most prominently Christian theology. Neither ironic nor profane, they are macabre works that hinge on death, consciousness, resurrection and the particularly baroque brand of Latin-American Catholicism that was constituted through received European Colonial narratives, as well as by forcibly depriving native peoples of their history and beliefs. Adopting the form of devotional objects or technological apparitions, these works seem variously like archaeological finds from some

electro-spiritual clinic, positivist science-fiction proposals for a future religion or props from an illusionist theatrical sideshow.

Annabel Lee (1988)

ANNABEL LEE is a diorama representing a cross-section of a miniature grave site – complete with tombstone and wreath. Beneath the earth, a video loop shows the figure of a child in a convulsive trance, as if buried alive in a coffin. This disturbing presence appears to live in perpetual suffering inside of the electronic device, a form of tortured televisual oblivion. The title makes reference to the 1849 ballad of sorrow and grief by Edgar Allan Poe, the American Romantic writer best known for his mystery and horror tales. In the poem Annabel Lee is the innocent child-bride of the heartbroken narrator. Buried in a tomb by the sea, she is said to immortalise Poe's love and premature loss of Virginia Clemm, who married the 27-year-old Poe at the age of 13. Taphephobia, the fear of being buried alive, was a widespread and not completely irrational anxiety before the advent of modern medicine.

Houdini (1989)

SUBMERGED IN A TANK OF WATER, the tube of a black-and-white monitor plays a video loop of Hernández-Díez appearing to perform the notorious Chinese Water Torture Cell trick that Harry Houdini introduced to the public in 1912. The Hungarian-American magician and showman Houdini was famous as both a master escapologist and a debunker of Spiritualist mediums whose claims to be able to contact the dead he fiercely disputed. Such is the mythology surrounding Houdini and this iconic illusion, it is often stated that he died performing it. With his ankles secured, he would be locked upside-down into a water-filled tank, his entire body visible through the glass until curtains were closed around it. Several anxious minutes would pass until Houdini emerged triumphantly from behind the curtains. Making explicit reference to outmoded corporeal punishment and execution, his tricks frequently offered a spectacle of vicarious self-liberation from the barbarities of the past. Putting himself in chains in the place of Houdini, Hernández-Díez devised a cruel and technically confounding self-portrait that imagines the monitor as a kind of performative torture device, the video loop as a mechanism of endless suspense.

San Guinefort (1991)

Saint Guinefort

SAN GUINEFORT is one of Hernández-Díez's most multifarious, bizarre and provocative works. It alludes to one of the more obscure intersections of Catholic history and folk tradition. Writing around 1260, the Inquisitor and Dominican friar Étienne de Bourbon related his investigation into the veneration of Saint Guinefort in the Dombes region of France. He discovered that this supposed Saint was, in fact, a dog. The account he disclosed was that a knight and his wife had one day left their greyhound Guinefort to guard their baby. When they returned to the castle they found the cradle empty and Guinefort covered in blood. Assuming it had murdered the baby, the knight hastily killed the dog, only later realising his error. Guinefort had in fact fought off a snake in order to save the child, who was found unharmed. Guinefort was buried unceremoniously in the forest outside the castle walls. Hearing of the martyred dog, local people began to believe in its power to protect children and began to bring their sick infants to the grave. Étienne de Bourbon was horrified to discover the strength of the superstition that had taken root. Defending the orthodoxy of the church, the friar had the heretical remains of the greyhound dug up and destroyed, razed the forest and outlawed the canine cult.

San Guinefort presents an ambiguous reformulation of this medieval episode in the form of a sculptural symbol that introduces medical science into the equation. A taxidermy dog is displayed in a clear vitrine as if in an incubator, an isolation chamber or a modern reliquary. Rubber gloves attached to the vitrine attest to the belief that holy relics must be touched for an effective transfer of sacred power to take place, a practice that began to wane in the thirteenth century with the proliferation of images of saints giving new prominence to sight. Yet the protective gloves, normally used to handle hazardous materials, and the sealed chamber also suggest that the dog-relic is contaminated – indeed, fear of the Black Death in Europe throughout the later 1300s was also a factor in the decline of the religious importance of tactility.

The mythological and superstitious history of the Convent dels Àngels brings new meanings to *San Guinefort*. Popular legend tells of a venerable stone dog that used to stand at the doorway of the church. It is said that the canine figure commemorates the thwarting of a robbery. The church once displayed an image of Saint Roch accompanied by a hound – Saint Roch is the patron saint of dogs – and the prospective thieves were frightened away as the image miraculously began to bark. The legend of Saint Roch tells that his life was saved by a dog that later ended up with a noble family – Roch's faithful hound was none other than the future Saint Guinefort.

Sagrado corazón activo (1991)

Active Sacred Heart

A HEART appears to float in the centre of a fluid-filled transparent crucifix, like a clinical altarpiece. Rigged up to medical equipment as if on a life-support machine, the heart appears to beat. This visceral work deals with the veneration of the heart of Jesus Christ in Catholicism and a key point of difference in theologies related with transubstantiation and 'real presence' – the notion that Jesus Christ is actually present in the Eucharist versus being a symbolic presence. Hernández-Díez extends this point of contention into the realm of the biomechanical, imagining an almost robotic device with a contrastingly organic and emotional core. *Sagrado corazón activo* departs from the head-in-a-jar trope of science fiction in which the desire for immortality has resulted in nothing but an immobile yet nourished brain. Yet in place of a bodiless individual capable only of thought and knowledge, the artist has apparently devised a perpetual mechanism of pure love, unconditional passion and truth. Furthermore, by centring on the cardiac organ, the device alludes to the seemingly-miraculous development of human organ transplantation, a procedure that involves specifically Christian archetypes of sacrifice on the part of the donor and a cheating of death for the receiver.

El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción aleja a los demonios (1991)

*The shining of the Holy union
wards off demons*

EL RESPLANDOR DE LA SANTA CONJUNCIÓN... centres on a surrogate screen – a large red monochromatic lightbox – suggestive of a large congregation, or cinema audience. In front of this giant interface stands a tripod mounted with flash units in the form of a crucifix. Synchronised with the cross through an electronic system of sensors and a sampler, the work periodically produces a burst of illumination accompanied by an ominous howling sound, also triggered by flash photography. Like a portal to another dimension, the work conjures a paranormal voltaic presence, as if a hybrid between a possessed television set and a flickering movie screen. It suggests a host of cryptic allusions, from a demonic version of the blinding light and disembodied voice described in the biblical story of the conversion of Saint Paul to Christianity, to the haunted television set as a portal to the spirit world in the supernatural horror film *Poltergeist* (1988). Presenting a kind of closed-circuit interactive exorcism scenario, the redemptive symbolism of the crucifix is pitted against a malevolent presence. *El resplandor de la Santa Conjunción...* seems to capture all of our contemporary anxieties about staring into screens, and the idea, as old as the medium itself, that television is bad for you.

La caja (1991)

The Box

IN LA CAJA, the artist addresses social distress and real, rather than literary, horror. Images of children appear to tumble to the ground as if rubbish being discarded. This Dantean vision referred to a dire and still contemporary situation – the plight of so-called *gamines* (street urchins) in Caracas and in Bogotá, where the work was first shown in 1992. A deplorable feature of many big cities globally, *gamines* are children who through poverty and conflict have been abandoned by society and pushed onto the streets in order to meet basic needs for survival. Often embroiled in crime, drugs and prostitution, street children have frequently been viewed as subhuman and unworthy of basic rights, becoming targets of vigilante groups, gangs, and extrajudicial efforts to 'clean' the streets.

Vas pa'l cielo y vas llorando (1992)

You're going to heaven and you're crying

TAKING ITS TITLE from a Venezuelan colloquialism meaning that someone has a wonderful opportunity that they are nevertheless complaining about, this work presents the video illusion of the spirits of dead children rising up to heaven from an earthy grave. It revives a culture of phantasmagoria – supernatural magic lantern séances with projected images of ghosts that were developed in Europe in the latter part of the 1700s. *Vas pa'l cielo y vas llorando* alludes to the culture of the *velorio del angelito* – the little angel's wake – festive celebrations of infant mortality once practiced by some rural cultures of Central and South America, particularly in the Andes. The small dead child became an object of adoration and their corpses were dressed-up, decorated and put on display before burial. These elaborate and apparently morbid rituals derived from an interpretation of Catholic doctrine in which it was understood that because a baptised baby's soul was pure and uncontaminated by sin, it would automatically go directly to heaven without having to go through purgatory. Although these practices seemed to combine with native beliefs about the supernatural role of the sky, anthropologists have argued that the central idea has a purely European explanation. Confronted with the very high child mortality that missionary colonial contact brought to the Americas, the clergy invented a new ideology according to which children who died became angels; hence one should not cry, but rejoice.

La hermandad (1994)

The Brotherhood

LA HERMANDAD comprises three monitors on wooden tables that show a startling trilogy of short video loops, while featuring a novel and distinctively visceral art material – fried skin. We witness strips of pig skin being fried in oil: the preparation of *chicharrones*, the cheap and popular street snack consumed across Latin America, becomes a metaphorical birth. On the second monitor, these greasy pork rinds are then equipped with wheels and used as improbable skateboards around the city streets: a journey through life. Finally, as seen on the third monitor, the skin-boards are devoured by hungry dogs: an untimely and grisly death. Further skin skateboards hang, sweating fat while waiting as if on a production line for their inevitable fate, yet the video loops are undeniably simultaneous – the violence of birth, life and death is occurring all at once at the same time. In linking food to the disintegration of flesh, the body that has lost its form and integrity, *La hermandad* reflects an archaic form of a key critical trope that gained traction in contemporary art in the 1990s – the abject.

Filamentos (2016)

Filaments

FILAMENTOS comprises copper panels etched with diagrammatic compositions based on different geometrical designs of incandescent lamp filaments – the glowing coils at the heart of the electric light bulb. These emblems recall electricity pylons or occultist symbols. Hernández-Díez casts the invention of electric light as a super-symbol of modern science and civilising experience: in short, of the Enlightenment itself as well as its colonial repercussions in the Americas. Metaphors of darkness versus light – as charged energy, lucid illumination or inspiration, for example – become mixed with those of technological reason and religious faith. Accounts of the reception of electric light by the church at the end of the nineteenth century provide a telling account of spiritual authenticity and modern comforts. Different religious denominations handled electrification quite differently. Evangelical churches opted for stronger brighter lights that suggested practicality and inclusiveness, while churches based around ritual and liturgy preferred a spare and symbolic use of light that aped candlelight and preserved a sense of the mystic potential of gloom.

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